

Creating Change with Incremental Steps: Enhancing Opportunities for Early Work Experience

Policy Brief

Authors:
Michael Morris
Nanette Goodman
Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University

January 28, 2013

This project was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research's Employment Policy and Measurement Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, under cooperative agreement H133B100030. The findings and conclusions are those of the authors and do not represent the policy of the Department of Education. The authors retain sole responsibility for any errors or omissions.

1. Overview

People with disabilities continue to experience a large gap in employment rates compared to their non-disabled peers. Analysts cite numerous reasons why – environmental barriers, attitudinal barriers, and the structure of disability benefits. Extensive reforms are needed to overhaul a system that drives a wedge between people with disabilities and employment.

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that even within the current system certain programs can be effective if well targeted and designed to meet the particular needs of participants. A prime example is work experience for youth with disabilities while they are in secondary school. Studies suggest that early work experience is a key factor in putting youth with disabilities on a trajectory for a lifetime of employment.

However, while many youth find part-time and summer jobs on their own, with help from friends or through family networks, youth with disabilities face a number of

barriers that make these avenues less productive. As a result these youth may need more assistance from government programs.

Several systems are in place to help high school students with disabilities achieve employment goals, including programs authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, the Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act and the Workforce Investment Act.

Unfortunately, these systems are only partially meeting the goal of serving all high school students with disabilities who could benefit from assistance. Although the programs are encouraged to provide the needed support, none are mandated.

Gaps in the system, overlapping responsibilities, and weak interagency agreements compound the problem. Some youth receive excellent services and support from small, targeted programs such as the Marriott Bridge program, Project Search and others. However, the system lacks a coherent vision on how best to help youth on a larger scale gain work experience during their high school years.

Modest changes to legislative and regulatory language and evaluation metrics combined with agency directives would enable the system to work more effectively. This brief provides an overview of the changes that are needed and why they are needed. The full report, available at www.ResearchonDisability.org, offers more detail.

2. Value of High School Work Experience

Getting youth with disabilities into the labor force early is a key determinant of the entire trajectory of their working lives. Studies conducted over the past 25 years provide empirical evidence that suggests that students with disabilities who have paid work experience while in school have higher rates of sustainable employment than students with disabilities who do not have work experience.

Determining the effectiveness of paid work experience is a complicated task that must take into account the issue of self-selection. Students who obtained employment had the motivation to work, and probably had higher expectations, more encouraging parents, better social networks, fewer functional difficulties, and/or better work-related skills. A simple comparison of youths who had paid experiences while still in school with those who did not does not account for these differences, and thus may overestimate the impact of early work experience.

Eight studies, each based on a different group of youth and each addressing the issue of self-selection using different statistical methods have concluded that paid work experience increases long term employment outcomes. The size of the impact varies among the different studies. Five of the studies estimated that students with high school work experience have more than twice the odds of working after high

school as those without such experience while the other three found smaller positive impacts. Hasazi et al. 1985; Wagner et al. 1993; Benz et al., 1997; Benz et al., 2000; Rabren et al. 2002; Shandra & Hogan 2008; Carter et al. 2011)

This outcome is not surprising. Work experience while in secondary school increases youth's motivation to work toward a career, provides a greater understanding of the skills needed to succeed at job tasks and work with supervisors and coworkers, and gives the student a better knowledge of career options and a greater understanding of disability related work accommodation strategies (Burgstahler & Bellman, 2009). In addition, work experiences can raise the work-related aspirations of youth and their families, and demonstrate to employers and community members the value that adolescents with severe disabilities can make to the workforce (Carter et al., 2010).

3. Challenges in the current systems

Several systems are in place to help high school students with disabilities achieve employment goals, including disability programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Vocational Rehabilitation Act as well as programs that serve students regardless of their disability status such as the Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act and the Workforce Investment Act. Each program is limited in the extent to which it can meet the needs of all students with disabilities in their effort to find and maintain work experience.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that schools identify the skills, experiences and services that students need to transition from school to work. This could include high school work experience but most schools cannot provide this type of experience as it is not their core competency and they generally do not have direct ties to employers. They must draw on programs run by the other agencies, which may either not exist or not be easily accessed. This challenge is compounded by the increased focus on core academic areas, standards-based curricula and high-stakes testing that has shifted focus away from exploring student's nonacademic goals.

The Rehabilitation Act provides federal grants to state to provide vocational rehabilitation services to help people with disabilities prepare for, and engage in, gainful employment. The Rehabilitation Act describes transition services but makes no specific mention of job search assistance or job supports while the student is still receiving services from the school.

Some state VR programs have developed comprehensive services and strong collaborative relationships with special education programs at the state and local levels to address the needs of high school students prior to their graduation. However there is tremendous variation in both transition practices and the resources committed to such practices among state VR agencies and, in many states

and localities, VR programs begin serving students too late in high school to help them obtain jobs prior to graduation.

State and local interagency agreements are vital for the coordination between VR and the education authority, however they are often not specific enough concerning the roles and responsibilities of each agency in regards to providing job support services while the student is in school.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides monthly means-tested payments to eligible children and adults with disabilities. Two program characteristics reduce the incentive for high school SSI recipients to work. First, the size of the payment is reduced proportional to amount of the recipient's income. In recent years, SSA has designed a number of work incentives to mitigate any negative financial impact of working and to promote employment among program recipients including transition-age youth but these are difficult to understand and rarely used. Second, SSA re-determines the eligibility of child SSI recipients when they reach age 18 based on whether they can perform "substantial gainful activity." SSA has been unclear whether work experience while in high school can be used as evidence that an individual has the ability to work and is thus not eligible for benefits as an adult.

Career and technical education (CTE) has evolved over the past several decades from a vocational education system often seen as a "dumping ground" for less academically talented students to a new system that combines high academic standards with technical skills. However, policy and practicalities encourage programs to focus on school-based technical and vocational education rather than hands-on work experience in a natural setting.

The Workforce Investment Act is the major federal program aimed at assisting at-risk youth and accepts youth with disabilities. However, there is no systematic mechanism to promote their inclusion and the performance requirements under WIA youth programs are often viewed as a disincentive to serving youth with disabilities.

4. Recommendations

Multiple programs share responsibility for helping students with disabilities find and maintain a job while in high school. However, limitations exist within each program and in the interaction between the programs. Improving the system requires multiple agencies to make regulatory changes and take administrative actions. Table I presents proposed modifications to these program that are likely to have the most significant impact.

Challenge	Recommendation
<p>Community work experience is often not included in transition planning for several reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools and special educators find it challenging to locate appropriate opportunities. • The increased focus on core academic areas, standards-based curricula and high-stakes testing has shifted focus away from exploring student’s nonacademic goals • Students and families may have low expectations about the ability of the student to work or may be unaware of the available opportunities. 	<p>Modify IDEA to require that all states develop a plan for transition services that describes specific approaches and activities to coordinate services and resources including support of work experience while still in school and the successful transition of youth with disabilities into adulthood.</p>
<p>Many VR agencies see providing work experience to high school students as outside their core responsibilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Rehabilitation Act describes transition services but makes no specific mention of job search assistance or job supports while the student is still receiving services from the school. • Because VR is supposed to be the payer of last resort, they are limited in the extent they can participate in providing services to children who are still in school. 	<p>Amend the list of services available under the Rehabilitation Act to include: pre-employment transition services that provide to students with disabilities work-based learning experience including in-school and after school work experience, or work experience outside the traditional school setting.</p>
<p>The Department of Education requires that all states report on 20 indicators to chart the progress of IDEA. Although two indicators are relevant for measuring the strength of transition planning, neither effectively measures the availability and use of community work experience.</p>	<p>Modify performance report requirements for state Education agencies to indicate what number and percentage of students with disabilities have indicated in their IEP the participation in work experience in an integrated community setting to meet post-secondary goals regarding employment and what number and percentage of students actually participated in such work experience for a minimum of four weeks that is at least 15 hours a week.</p>

<p>The current methods for monitoring and evaluating RSA do not measure the services provided to high school age students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although each state is required to report the number of transition age youth (defined as ages 14-24), they are not required to report the number of youth that are more closely aligned with high school age (e.g. 14-18) or the number of students served while in high school. As a result, it is difficult to identify how significant a role VR plays for this population. • RSA conducts annual reviews and periodic on-site monitoring of programs and includes a special focus on transition services and employment outcomes for transition age youth. However, this process does not require the review teams to assess community job services for in-school youth. 	<p>Modify RSA state reporting requirements to include school age youth ages 14-18.</p> <p>Modify Monitoring and Technical Assistance Review to assess the availability and use of job search, job placement and job support services for in-school youth.</p>
<p>The state and local interagency agreements are vital for the coordination between VR and the education authority, however they have significant limitations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local education agencies do not effectively engage VR agency personnel in the planning and provision of transition services for transition-age youth. • Key stakeholder groups have differing expectations about the services and level of involvement that each agency can provide to transition-age youth and the agreements are often not specific enough concerning the roles and responsibilities of each agency. • Mechanisms are not in place to determine whether procedures, processes, and services specified in interagency agreements are carried out, or whether they have the intended impact. 	<p>Instruct the Department of Education and the Department of Labor to issue joint guidance to their respective state agency counterparts that encourages the support of work experiences in integrated community settings as an evidence-based practice that improves post-secondary employment outcomes for students with disabilities.</p>
<p>At age 18, SSI re-determines the recipient's eligibility status. SSA has not provided explicit guidance about whether high-school work experience</p>	<p>Instruct SSA to issue guidance to their field offices and all SSI and/or SSDI beneficiaries between the ages of 14 and 18</p>

<p>can be used as evidence of the student’s ability to reach substantial gainful activity. As a result, students and parents are concerned that working while in high school will lead to the denial of the student’s SSI eligibility during the age 18 redetermination process.</p>	<p>that encourages students with disabilities to seek out and participate in work experience in integrated community settings. The guidance would state clearly the work incentives that can be applied during age 18 re-determination that may demonstrate that although an individual is working their disability continues to impede them from working at a substantial level, indicating eligibility for Social Security disability benefits.</p> <p>In addition, SSA a) expands the student earned income exclusion to disregard all earned income for students under age 22 who are regularly attending school, and b) suspends, until age 22, the age 18 re-determination for any SSI recipient who is working a minimum of 10 hours per week and is regularly attending school.</p>
<p>Students with the most significant disabilities are the least likely to work while in high school.</p>	<p>Adopt the Transitioning towards Excellence in Achievement and Mobility (TEAM) legislation introduced in 2011 in Congress that would help support greater opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in work experiences as part of transition services and authorize new funding to improve the scope of services available through state and local education agencies as well as the state Vocational Rehabilitation agency.</p>

References

- Benz, M.R., Lindstrom, L. & Yovanoff, P. (2000). Improving Graduation and Employment Outcomes of Students with Disabilities: Predictive Factors. *Exceptional Children*. 66(4).
- Benz, M.R., Yovanoff, P. & Doren, B. (1997). School-to-work components that predict postschool success for students with and without disabilities. *Exceptional Children* 63(2).
- Burgstahler, S.J. & Bellman, S. (2009). Differences in perceived benefits of internships for subgroups of students with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. 31 (2009) 155–165
- Carter, E.W., Trainor, A.A., Cakiroglu, O., Swedeen, B., & Owens, L.A. (2010). Availability of and Access to Career Development Activities for Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*. 33(1):13-24.
- Carter, E.W., Austin, D. & Trainor, A.A. (2011). Factors Associated With the Early Work Experiences of Adolescents With Severe Disabilities. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*. 49(4): 233–247.
- Hasazi, S.B., Gordon, L.R., & Roe, C.A. (1985). Factors Associated with the Employment Status of Handicapped Youth Exiting High School from 1979 to 1983. *Exceptional Children*. 51(6):455-469
- Rabren, K., Dunn, C., & Chambers, D. (2002). Predictors of posthigh school employment among young adults with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*. 25, pp. 25–40.
- Shandra, C.L. & Hogan, D.P. (2008). School-to-work program participation and the post-high school employment of young adults with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. 29:117–130.