

The transition from school-to-work is an exciting time for students with disabilities. However, many barriers to employment may exist, including low expectations for employment outcomes, limited access to work-based learning experiences, and limited connections to community resources and services. School professionals can facilitate successful transition to competitive integrated employment (CIE) by focusing on work-based learning and paid employment prior to graduation to assist students in achieving their employment goals.

### Quality Characteristics of CIE

- People with disabilities are hired and paid by the business where the work is taking place and not by a service provider.
- People with disabilities earn the same wages as employees without disabilities who are doing similar work (and at least minimum wage).
- People with disabilities perform work tasks to the business standard as employees without disabilities in the same setting.
- The ratio of people with disabilities to employees without disabilities in the business is in proportion to their presence in the general population.
- There are opportunities to interact with and develop relationships with coworkers who are not paid to assist the person who has a disability.

Research shows that students with disabilities drop out of high school at a greater rate than their peers without disabilities. Participation in work experiences during high school encourages students to think about their employment goals. It has also been found that students with and without disabilities who participate in work-related experiences while in school are more likely to obtain CIE one year after graduation. School personnel must be familiar with the quality characteristics of CIE in order to promote successful post school employment outcomes for students with disabilities.

### Work Experiences

Work-based learning are experiences that use the facilities, materials, coworkers/employees,

and/or tasks within a business to teach students work and related skills. Teachers, counselors, and support staff provide instruction and assessment within business environments instead of within the school. These experiences extend the classroom into the community for the purpose of assisting students in identifying interests, preferences, and skills for future career possibilities. Work experiences may include job shadowing, work sampling, service-learning / volunteering, internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment.

**FIELD TRIPS:** Work experiences are not the same as field trips where everyone from a class visits the same location as a large group. Typically, during field trips students observe and do not have the opportunity to participate. Students with disabilities need the opportunity to participate in individualized experiences that reflect the student's specific interests and preferences. These opportunities will be different in each community

and require networking with businesses. For instance, a student who has expressed an interest in music may benefit from interviewing employees at a radio station, a recording studio, places where music is featured, and so forth. Using this example, the student's team needs to explore where people who are interested in music are employed in their localities and approach these employers about opportunities for career exploration. These opportunities not only give the student an idea of career choices but also broaden the knowledge of the school personnel about potential job opportunities in specific industries and business types. Since not all students will have the same interests, all students in a class do not need to have experiences in the same businesses.

**JOB SHADOWING:** Job shadowing occurs for an extended time, such as a half day or for a full work day. During these experiences, the student follows or shadows an employee within a specific business of interest. These experiences also occur in friends and family members' workplaces. As previously mentioned, the experiences should take into consideration the student's skills, preferences, and interests, and not be based on convenience.

**WORK SAMPLING:** Work sampling or non-paid experiences allow the student to spend time learning the tasks associated with specific jobs and careers including social and other related skills. Specific time limitations are placed on this type of experience related to the Fair Labor Standards Act regulations for non-paid work experiences. Additional information on the labor laws related to work sampling and non-paid work experiences can be found on the Department of Labor website, Wage and Hour Division.

School systems must carefully analyze the types of non-paid work experiences selected. For instance, it may be easy to place a student at a business where school personnel have family members or friends. However, these experiences must be matched to specific students. If these training experiences do not reflect future job possibilities or specific interests of the student receiving the training, they still may not provide relevant experiences.

**SERVICE-LEARNING:** Service learning is hands-on volunteer experience in the community based on the student's goals and interests. Volunteer experiences provide an opportunity for students to develop their resumes for future employment. However, students should not "volunteer" in businesses where people without disabilities are paid to complete the work. For instance, a student should not volunteer at an office doing clerical tasks if other workers without disabilities are paid to do the clerical tasks. Volunteering at organizations to do clerical tasks may be appropriate if the work is done by other volunteers. Work experiences in businesses where other employees are paid to do the work must be established as work sampling / non-paid experiences or paid work that meet the US Department of Labor guidelines for these experiences.

**INTERNSHIPS AND APPRENTICESHIPS:** Internships and apprenticeships are a good way to prepare students with disabilities for CIE upon leaving school. Students are assigned specific tasks over a pre-determined length of time. Internships are helpful for a number of reasons.

- Allow students to learn practical employment skills in a real work environment.
- Offer students who have never worked the opportunity to gain experience under the guidance of a trained professional who can help students develop and refine their professional skills.
- Help prepare students for both the work demands of a job and the social skills needed to interact professionally with supervisors and colleagues.
- Offer more intensive applied work and extended duration of work opportunities beyond that commonly offered by typical work sampling or non-paid work experiences.

## Summary

All young people with disabilities should have the opportunity to be included in their communities, in their schools, and in society. People with disabilities consistently perform better in typical work environments and natural community settings. Scheduling should focus on providing a variety of experiences across the students' school year. Each student, along with their family and teachers, should decide what experiences are appropriate to a student's long-term goals and make recommendations concerning work experiences. Educators who fully comprehend the importance of work-based learning can empower young people with disabilities to achieve CIE outcomes. Listen to the student. Listen to the family. What are they saying? What do they want? What do they need? Incorporating their desires is a critical feature of student-oriented experiences.

Also, find out what businesses and industries require of their workforce. This is critical. Teachers must look at the daily curricula and evaluate whether the skills, objectives, and activities they are currently emphasizing relate to what employers need. Teachers must also determine whether their curricula are being influenced by what businesses say is required and needed. These actions can help better prepare students for employment!

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