



## Work-Based Learning Experiences for Students with Disabilities: Important Tips for School Personnel

Schools can begin developing work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities by analyzing the businesses in the community. This is referred to as a labor market analysis. Training should reflect a community's local economy. Each school system's work-based learning experiences will be different based on the community in which the students reside. Development of these experiences will entail ongoing assessment of the employers in the community and the types of work available.

Each student's preferences and interests should be matched to the businesses where experiences take place. Rotating students through the same work experiences is not a best practice nor sufficient for assisting students in achieving competitive integrated employment outcomes. This is a common “trap” that schools fall into when establishing a work-based learning program. For instance, all students go to the same fast-food restaurant to assemble containers, the church to fold the Sunday service bulletins, the gas station to clean restrooms, and other typical entry-level jobs. This may happen because of low expectations for work outcomes for the students or for convenience. Instead, a variety of individualized options must be developed and available.

### Common Work-Based Learning Mistakes

- Simulated work experiences occur at the school rather than in community businesses.
- Rotating all students through the same experiences.
- Not individualizing experiences to each student's work interests and preferences.
- Assuming that most students will have jobs such as food service, janitorial, and other typical jobs obtained by workers with disabilities.
- Grouping multiple students together in the same area rather than dispersing them throughout the business.

It is way too common for people with disabilities to only work in service industry jobs such as food service, janitorial, or other entry-level positions. While these are honorable and necessary jobs within the community, they do not align with every student's skills and interests. Teachers and direct service providers need to “get to know” businesses' needs that go beyond traditional jobs obtained by people with disabilities. This means that the school personnel responsible for establishing relationships with businesses need to identify a diverse set of training experiences.

Another common mistake is to only set up work experiences at the school. It may be quicker to develop a work-based program on the school grounds such as asking the school's office for activities (e.g., shredding paper, stuffing envelopes, etc.). However, if these activities do not reflect future job

possibilities, the experience may not have a positive impact on future employment. Most importantly, simulated work in the classroom does not provide coworker interaction that is critical for job success. Work experiences on the school grounds should be for younger students, and time in community businesses should increase as students near graduation.

Providing integrated opportunities in businesses is one of the most important components of work-based experiences. All too often, students with disabilities attend programs only in segregated settings. Experiences in the community provide chances for students to develop independence, such as transportation, social, and work skills.

## Getting Started with Businesses

School personnel who have never interacted with the business community may feel intimidated when approaching employers about work experiences. However, many communities and schools have joined together to create opportunities for students with

disabilities. There are a number of ways to get started. School personnel could target any business within their community but one way to begin is to start with people that you know as well as people that your students and their families know. If people in your network are not in a position to help you establish work experiences, they may be able to provide you with letters or phone calls of introduction.

*As an example, a transition coordinator had a friend whose family owned a senior living complex. The friend was the administrator in another community and had networks within the business community. She was more than willing to speak with the administrator of the “sister” facility in the coordinator’s home community. After a call of introduction, the transition coordinator met with the human resource (HR) director to talk about work experiences and the importance for students with disabilities.*

*The HR director coordinated a meeting with the various departments at the assisted living facility. This included the beauty salon, the recreation department, the library, the mail department, and the cafeteria as examples. The interesting thing about the senior living facility is that it provided a number of work experience opportunities that reflected what might be found in any community. Said another way, the facility was similar to a small city within the community.*

*After meeting with the various department supervisors, school personnel were assigned to observe each department to identify work tasks that could be done for work experiences. A memorandum of agreement was signed between the school and the administration outlining the responsibilities of the*

### Best Practices for Work-Based Learning

- Work experiences represent the local business economy.
- School personnel complete an ongoing labor market analysis.
- Formal agreements are developed between the business community and the school.
- Businesses selected for work experiences match each student’s work interests and preferences.
- School personnel develop relationships with the businesses to establish a variety of experiences that expand the options for students interested in employment outcomes beyond traditional service industry jobs.
- Students are dispersed throughout the businesses to maximize opportunities to interact with coworkers without disabilities.

*schools, the expectations for the students, and the responsibilities of the facility. Students were matched to experiences in the various departments based on their personal work interests and preferences. School personnel were with the students during their individualized experiences.*

This is just one example of how to arrange a meaningful work experience. Variations of these steps could be applied to any community business. You do not need to contact only large businesses. Any size company may be willing to provide work experiences for students with disabilities. When using smaller businesses, or any size company, be sure to limit the number of students on-site during any given time to ensure that students interact with coworkers who do not have disabilities. If you physically place students in a small area, you may only simulate working in a segregated situation. The following table provides some ideas to consider when approaching the business community.

<b>Getting Started with Businesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Start with people that you and other school personnel know.</li><li>■ Don't forget to network with people that the students and their families know!</li><li>■ Talk with the school's advisory board and/or committee. These individuals are links to the business community!</li><li>■ Keep up with local business news!</li><li>■ Attend meetings where people get together! Talk with them about what you are doing!</li><li>■ Join local business associations!</li><li>■ Make presentations!</li><li>■ Use target mailings, phone calls, and emails. Follow-up with the businesses.</li><li>■ Prepare an outline or script.</li><li>■ Ask to meet with and tour the business. Be respectful regarding busy work times so that you are not interfering with the business operations.</li></ul>

## Summary

This resource provides overview recommendations regarding work-based learning experiences. It is only an introduction. Other things to consider include labor laws on work-based learning, setting up work experiences, and supporting the students in community businesses. Additional resources about work-based learning experiences are available on the Illinois SWTCIE website.

The contents of this resource were developed under a grant number H421D220009 from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C. §§ 1221e-3 and 3474)