

## WORK-BASED LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH HIGH SUPPORT NEEDS: THEMES, STRATEGIES, AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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**“Work is good.”** This abbreviated assessment of research on the impact of work experiences for students with disabilities is often offered by Dr. Richard Luecking of the University of Maryland during his presentations. Though simple, it suggests a much broader current understanding supported by federal legislation (such as WIOA, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) and national initiatives (such as Employment First) that the goal of youth employment is competitive jobs in the community, and that youth benefit from opportunities to gain work experience in community-based settings. These experiences are often referred to as “work-based learning”. Research supports the idea that meaningful work experiences during secondary education is a strong predictor of post-school employment for students with all disabilities (Luecking & Fabian 2000, Test et al., 2009).

Work-based learning (WBL) is not specific to individuals with disabilities. It is a strategy that has emerged over the last few decades for all students to develop and explore employment interests and career options. WBL is more than just a young person getting a job or gaining work experience. Community WBL experiences collaboratively engage employers and schools in providing structured learning experiences for students. These experiences focus on assisting students in developing broad, transferable skills that will lead to competitive integrated employment. WBL links classroom learning to work and work to classroom learning. A quality WBL program can also make school-based learning more relevant by providing students with opportunities to apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to real world situations.

One strength of community-based WBL is that it provides opportunities for real-world assessment that not only help students develop employment and career interests, but allow them to begin to develop a sense of themselves as a worker in the mainstream workforce. It also empowers them with sufficient knowledge and skills to pursue employment and careers as an adult in a self-determined way, and provides the opportunity to address fears, concerns, and accommodation needs. Most importantly, community-based WBL leads to students who are ready to work when they

leave high school and who are well-positioned for their future careers (NTACT 2016). With expanded employment expectations for students with more significant disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, many school districts and their partners are creating innovative programs to provide students with significant disabilities strong WBL options.

*Work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities are supervised, school-coordinated activities which provide opportunities for students to achieve employment related competencies in a workplace environment. These activities extend the classroom into the workplace and are related to students' career interests and program of study. Work-based learning experiences involve assessment of students' interests, aptitudes, and abilities while learning about career possibilities. (VCU Center on Transition Innovations)*

Donald Super's stages of vocational development can serve as a framework from which to consider career exploration and employment experiences within transition, through work-based learning.

- **Interest (11-12 years old).** Student identifies their likes and dislikes as basis for career choices.
- **Capacity (13-14 years old).** Student incorporates more realistic ideas and can relate their own skills to specific job requirements.
- **Tentative (15-17 years old).** Student tries out tentative choices, incorporating needs, interests, and abilities in coursework, part time work, volunteering, and job shadowing. Students may identify the field and level of work at this stage. The student may not know how to weigh their interests, capacities, and values, but they have the necessary building blocks for choice.
- **Crystallization of Preference (18-21 years old).** Student converts general preferences into specific choices regarding jobs and careers. Reality dominates as the individual enters the job market or training after high school.

Aligned with these stages, WBL occurs along a continuum of experiences, beginning with less intensive short-term exploratory experiences that help a young person begin to think of themselves as a “worker”, to more intensive long-term experiences. Examples of WBL in community settings include:

- Job tours
- Job shadows
- Informational interviews
- Short-term job tryouts (situational assessments)
- Volunteer work
- Internships (paid or unpaid)
- Pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships
- Paid employment
- Service learning

When developing and implementing a WBL program, it is important to establish a thorough assessment process. It is also important to ensure that both classroom and community-based instruction occur as part of the program. Educators need to have a good understanding of how to establish and maintain community-based worksites and how legal regulations impact a WBL program. Educators and providers must also take issues surrounding transportation, onsite supports, data collection, and family engagement into account to ensure that the WBL program is effective in meeting the individualized needs of a student with complex support needs.

Unfortunately, providing quality and meaningful WBL to students with high support needs is a stubborn and persistent problem, with many schools experiencing challenges in supporting all students with individually tailored WBL experiences in the community. With changing expectations regarding increasing competitive employment for students with more significant disabilities, and a presumption of employment aligned with Employment First principles, some schools are tackling this challenge for the first time. As schools strive to establish community-based opportunities for WBL, they may encounter logistical, staffing, and policy barriers. These barriers include not having enough staff, navigating employer liability concerns, creating new policies regarding “off hour” work, transportation, aligning work-experiences with Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) goals, and engaging families. While some districts are meeting these challenges with innovative ideas, others are in need of strategies to help establish effective programs.

To help address these issues, the Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment (MPTE), the state’s federally funded Partnerships in Employment (PIE) project, held a series of forums to learn more about what districts, educators, and direct support providers nationwide are experiencing in the field. In partnership with National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) and the Youth Employment Solutions Center (YES! Center), we conducted four live online dialogues. The format of the dialogues encouraged attendees to share their input based on the predetermined guiding questions. After conducting the forums, a number of common themes emerged:

- **Alignment with student IEP goals** – The importance of providing work-based learning experiences with stated goals and not just what is currently available through the school district (e.g., routing students through the ‘school work sites’). Doing so requires writing IEP goals and developing planned WBL experiences to reflect the individual student’s desired work and career goals.
- **Cultivating relationships with community business partners** – The need to build relationships with local businesses and organizations in the student’s community that are open to providing WBL experiences.
- **Structure of state and local district partner policies and procedures** – Restrictions on the ability of staff, including paraprofessionals, to support students in the community off the school campus and during non-school hours can pose a number of challenges. Another challenge is the perceived need for students to always have onsite staff supervision during WBL.
- **Transportation** – Challenges and logistics in getting students to work sites while navigating school policies, apprehensive parents, staff capacity, and access to reliable transportation.
- **Paid and natural supports** – The importance of providing meaningful support for students while also developing natural supports at the work sites.
- **Family engagement** – The importance of engaging families in the process of building the network of opportunities, as well as providing space for them to freely express concerns and fears.

Based on the themes identified, this brief discusses strategies to provide meaningful work-based learning to students with high support needs, recommendations for implementation of work-based learning, and policy issues to ensure a high-quality program.

## WORK-BASED LEARNING: PROGRAM STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURE

### Initial Assessment for Moving Ahead with WBL

Work-based learning begins with collecting information and assessing data to guide the identification of WBL opportunities for the student. To develop WBL activities and strategies to assist students in successful experiences, educators should develop information through assessments to determine the student's potential employment interests and consider the student's complexity of supports needed for: a) communication; b) cognitive, physical, and social-emotional functioning; c) self-care. As with all activities within WBL, conduct assessments through a person-centered, student driven process that fully engages the young person in all decision-making, and promotes self-determination. It is also important to recognize that this initial assessment is not for determining "if" a student should pursue WBL experiences, or whether they are "ready". As with all young people, presume that the student with significant disabilities will be working in a job and career as an adult, that WBL experiences are for all students, and there is no "readiness criteria" they need to meet before starting the career exploration process.

After determining an initial direction for pursuing WBL based on assessment information, practitioners can incorporate this information into the student's IEP. Practitioners can work in partnership with the student and family as they move forward on how to best develop and implement WBL activities and services.

### Worksite Development

*"We find that if we have lots of different options it gives us a better chance of getting students out to the sites they need and want to go to."*  
—National Dialogue Participant

The quality of work experiences is often based on the ability of schools to conduct outreach to local businesses and employers. Explore, develop, and implement work-based learning sites driven by individual student interests identified via the initial assessment. It is important to think about WBL site development in the framework of a "dual customer" approach: both the student and the business or community organization need to gain something from this engagement with the student. As with any relationship, developing a worksite placement

requires effective communication and the ability to build a strong level of trust.

The following are recommendations for schools to consider as they develop WBL sites:

- a) If sufficient resources are available, have a staff person who has dedicated time and expertise for employer outreach.
- b) Within employer outreach, be sure to consider the full array of possible work experience sites: for profit, not for profit, and government.
- c) Take advantage of existing resources and connections within the school with businesses, including career and technical education, and any type of general school-to-work initiatives within the district.
- d) Networking is a key component to identifying WBL sites. Solicit and utilize the networks and ideas from the student, student's family, school staff, provider agency staff, community leaders, and community groups.
- e) With the increased presence of public vocational rehabilitation (VR) within schools as part of WIOA, educators can leverage VR connections with employers. In addition, pursue partnerships with your local workforce development system/American Job Center, which do extensive business outreach and focus in part on youth employment.

Individualize identification of opportunities for WBL in the community, based upon the student's interests and goals. Consider the following factors:

- How does this opportunity fit with the student's specific interests and goals?
- How does the site align with the assessed interests and needs identified for the student?
- How has the student been fully involved in the decision about choosing a WBL opportunity in a way that promotes self-determination and informed choice?

When considering the issue of finding WBL experiences that fit with the student's specific interests, it is important to remember that most young people's initial work experiences are not based on a career goal, but are often driven by opportunities that are convenient and readily available to them. For many young people, initial work experiences are about exploring and starting to figure out what working is all about. At the same time, even these early experiences are driven by

interests, comfort, and enjoyment – and this should be true of youth with significant disabilities as well. It is also important to recognize that, like all young people, sometimes a student with a disability needs to start exploring options and gaining experience somewhere, to serve as a learning experience to build on. Exposing young people to a variety of workplaces via job shadows, job tours, and other types of exploratory experiences, and seeing their reactions to these different environments, is a good place to start. Over time, as the young person begins to get a better sense of their employment interests and their likes and dislikes, the focus should get increasingly specific in terms of their types of work experiences.

### On-Site Support

*“We hire permanent part time staff. We are in close proximity to the University, so we are typically hiring students so that there is a same age peer relationship between our staff and our students.” —National Dialogue Participant*

Work-based learning in the community typically involves some level of on-site professional support. The level of support is based upon the student’s complexity of supports needed for communication, task performance, and self-care, along with safety considerations. Regardless, staff should be onsite on occasion to observe and evaluate the student’s progress and learning.

Onsite support can include:

- School staff (teachers, assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, employment specialists, related service personnel).
- Contracted community rehabilitation provider staff.
- Site based natural supports.

Providing professional supports for WBL requires a particular skill set around effective job coaching, including, systematic instruction, facilitation of natural supports, accommodations, assistive technology, employment rights and responsibilities, as well as data collection/ documenting performance (including association with IEP goals). Staff providing job supports should be well-versed in best practices. [The Association of People Supporting Employment First \(APSE\) Universal Competencies](#) include information on best practices for job supports.

One of the challenges of WBL can be school district requirements for onsite staff support (supervision)

beyond what the student needs. This creates numerous challenges, including:

- learned dependence by the student and business on staff supports.
- interference with the development of natural supports.
- expectation by families that their child will always have staff supports when they are adults.

It is important for students during transition to learn to use the supports that are readily available in the workplace, rather than rely on external staff. The requirement for ongoing presence of staff during longer-term WBL experiences can negatively impact student employment and career success as an adult. If staff are required to be on the job site, do everything possible to stay in the background and facilitate the student’s use of natural supports.

*“For a great number of our students, natural supports works really well but we have to make sure we maintain the communication with the employers or the work site supervisors to make sure if any issues come up that we are able to get on them, supporting the business and the student.” —National Dialogue Participant*

### Identification of Assistive Technology Needs

With the prevalence of technology and its ability to serve as a key support mechanism for employment success, use of technology should be a core consideration as part of work-based learning for all students. As support needs are identified prior to and during WBL experiences, determine whether technology can help address issues. This article from [Technology to Unlock Potential](#), provides details on conducting a technology assessment. [The Assistive Technology for Transition Planning](#) form from Southeastern Special Education, can also serve as a guide in assessing technology needs. Identify and implement assistive technology (AT) options collaboratively with the student in a way that empowers the student and promotes self-determination and informed choice. Along with assessment for technology and identification of technology options for support on the job, it is also important to consider the student’s AT training needs. The publication, [Using Technology for Remote Support, Self-Management, and Success in Employment and the Community](#), from the Institute for Community Inclusion, provides detailed information on use of technology for employment supports.

## Transportation

Part of work-based learning includes identifying reliable transportation for a student to go to and from the WBL site. Rather than school staff simply arranging for transportation, fully engage students in identifying transportation options and arranging transportation as part of the learning experience. Particularly for students who don't drive, self-management of transportation is an important skill to develop. Emphasize and prioritize use of transportation available to the general community, rather than "specialized" transportation. If practitioners provide travel training, make it individualized and meaningful for the student. Travel training should be a means to support the student's engagement in the community and not supplant the community experience itself.

Examples of transportation options include:

- Public transportation.
- Paratransit.
- App based transportation (Uber, Lyft).
- Walking.
- Biking.
- Shared ridership with a family member, coworker or friend.
- School provided transportation (bus, van).

Identification of transportation options should align with the overall principles of career planning in general: use of collective brainstorming and networks; outreach to community resources (e.g., transportation officials and providers); and student-driven and individualized. [Resources on transportation](#) can be found on the Employment First Massachusetts website.

## Incorporation of Self-Determination and Informed Choice Within Work-Based Learning

Incorporate development of self-determination skills and practicing informed choice throughout work-based learning. Examples for doing so include:

- a) Students identifying the factors that are important to them in WBL, including types of jobs they want to explore and skills they want to develop.
- b) Having students highly engaged in the development of WBL sites and choosing the sites where they will gain experience.
- c) Having students fully engage co-workers and

advocate for their needs on a job site, rather than staff doing so on their behalf.

- d) Working with students to determine what they are learning from their work-based experiences, and how that information can be applied to future decisions and choices.

## Strategies to Work with Families

*"I've seen parents move a lot in their position about whether or not their student can work just by showing them the community that is there to support their child."*

—National Dialogue Participant

Families know their child better than anyone; consequently, the importance of involving families in the work-based learning experience process is critical to have both family "buy-in" for this process and to have a holistic understanding of the student and their post-school goals. Considerations for family engagement include:

- Ensuring two-way communication.
- Conducting family interviews about expectations of employment.
- Providing clear information to families regarding the WBL program, including benefits, safety and staff support, expectations, and outcomes.
- Developing strategies for addressing any family concerns that may arise (safety, transportation, public benefits, general resistance to employment for their family member, etc.).
- Providing professional development on family engagement to all staff who will be working with the student.
- Considering cultural values in terms of the family's view of the roles of professionals and expectation of work experience as a youth.
- Leveraging family networks to identify sites for WBL experiences.

A core concept of WBL is building from early exploratory experiences to more intense experiences over time. This series of evolving experiences can be particularly helpful with families who may express hesitation and concerns over the family member exploring employment. Be clear that the early short-term experiences are intended just to begin exploration of employment options. As those experiences are successful, practitioners and family members will build a sense of trust and confidence, and students can take on more intensive longer-term work-based learning experiences.

Maintain ongoing communication with families to:

- Get their assistance and support in ensuring their child is prepared for their employment experiences.
- Share the successes the student is experiencing in work-based settings.
- Get feedback from parents about their questions or concerns.
- Find out what the student is sharing with the family about their employment experiences.
- Get guidance and support from the family regarding any issues occurring during the WBL experiences.

### Abiding by WBL Policies

*“Our district, through special education leadership, has developed community-based instructions, policies, and procedures. For any student leaving campus, their special education instructor needs to follow the procedure and align it with the IEP.”*

—National Dialogue Participant

It is crucial for administrative, teaching, and other school staff have a good understanding of school district policies regarding community-based experiences, and the legal requirements (such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, supervision requirements, liability and worker’s compensation, etc.). Educators and district personnel can occasionally misunderstand what is and is not required and permitted for work-based learning (e.g., students allowed to go in the community, volunteer vs. paid work, etc.). Rather than presuming what is and is not allowed, or relying on anecdotal information, become familiar with federal, state, and local requirements. Review the source documents (policies, legislation, etc.) or consult experts (e.g., your state department of labor, state department of education). A key to WBL’s success is understanding the requirements and applying them consistently. Collect all policy documents in a central location for easy reference, incorporate compliance with them into staff training, and review them regularly.

To ensure that a school district is meeting all of the legal requirements needed for the implementation of a community WBL program, the following documents are recommended:

- Family release forms.
- Clearances (students, staff, worksite staff).
- Training agreement between the business and the school district.
- Indemnification letter (liability).

## DOCUMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION

*“Whatever is in their IEP that we can monitor on the worksite [we will]. Some of our students are out half of the day for the entire year. It’s a lot of time spent on the worksite during the school day, so we want to capture what they are doing.”* — National Dialogue Participant

### Data and Documentation Instruments

It is important to develop a procedure to collect and review the data regarding the student’s progress at the community-based work experience. Ensuring the systematic collection of data from the WBL experiences is a vital step. Data collection instruments can include:

- Job Analysis: systematic analysis of the workplace in terms of jobs, job tasks, environment, and supports.
- Task Analysis: step-by-step breakdown of job tasks for identification of prompts, accommodation needs, and systematic instruction.
- Progress Reports: a systematic approach to documentation of performance and skill development.
- Student self-reflection/journaling.
- Business surveys.

[\*The Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan\*](#) is a good example of a comprehensive documentation instrument.

### Identifying Disability-Specific Needs

In addition to documenting items typical for any youth in a work-based learning experience (level of interest and fit with work environment and tasks, punctuality, proper dress, appropriate social interactions, compliance with work environment rules, demonstration of skills, and task performance), there are items specific to disability. Some of these items include: accommodation needs, possible need for assistive technology, disability disclosure issues, and level of job coaching required.

### Documentation Via Video and Pictures

With the permission of the student, family, and the community-based site, consider taking videos or pictures of the student at the site during the WBL experience. This can be helpful in developing a portfolio and video resume for the student. Practitioners can also use video to share the experience with the student’s family, and as way for the student to review and reflect on a specific experience or variety of experiences they have

undertaken. Use of video can also allow school staff who may not be at the work site to assess job performance, identify usefulness of and need for accommodations, make adjustments for success, and document progress.

### Sharing and Incorporating Documentation

The school and district should have clear policies and procedures regarding how the data and documentation regarding the results of WBL will be communicated to the student and family, as well as how information will be communicated and shared with other team members. In addition, have clear guidelines about how to incorporate the information into existing planning documents (IEP – Individualized Education Program; SOP – Summary of Performance; IPE – Individualized Plan for Employment [VR]); ISP – Individual Support Plan).

### Student Reflection

Each work-based learning experience serves as an opportunity for the student to learn about what it is like to be at work, to develop career interests, and understand what they need to succeed on the job. Student self-reflection is an important component of this. Students should self-reflect regularly, with practitioners documenting self-reflection with the student on an ongoing basis. Self-reflection can be shared and documented both on a 1:1 basis and in a group, with journaling as a component. Videotaping the student’s reflections is also an option, particularly for those with limited literacy experiences. Developing these self-reflection skills is not only important during transition, but can be helpful to the student as they manage their jobs and career as an adult.

Areas for discussion and self-reflection include:

- The student’s likes and dislikes about the experience in terms of tasks, environment, co-workers, etc.
- What they felt they did well.
- What they found challenging.
- What areas they want to work on improving and building skills in.
- What kind of supports and assistance they needed and how to access these supports.
- What kind of additional supports and assistance would be helpful.
- Possible accommodations and assistive technology.
- Handling disclosure of disability issues to supervisors and co-workers.
- How the lessons learned can be applied in choosing future work experiences, and for future success on the job.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPACT ON POLICY

The previous sections have defined work-based learning and discussed the structures for effective WBL programs for students with significant disabilities. This section provides a series of recommendations to ensure quality WBL for students with significant disabilities, based on issues and ideas shared during the national dialogue. It also includes policy recommendations that can help ensure these quality practices during the transition process, resulting in post-secondary employment and career success.

### Having a values-driven program

Core to effective WBL and work experience during transition is starting with a clear set of values that can be used to guide day-to-day operational decisions, rather than simply building a program that consists of a variety of work experiences. Education agency personnel should consider developing a clear values statement. Such values include the following:

- a) Employment First - a presumption that all students are capable of working in competitive integrated employment with resources prioritized to that expectation.
- b) A goal that all students will have at least one individualized employer paid work experience before leaving school.
- c) Emphasis on typical teenage and youth work experiences.
- d) Student work experiences that maximize full inclusion and integration.
- e) Minimal use of group employment, school-based employment, and school social enterprises.
- f) Maximum use of natural supports both within the workplace and in terms of existing school and community resources.

### Mandatory career planning starting at an early age

A future that includes having a job that maximizes self-sufficiency is a typical expectation of teenagers. Therefore, it is insufficient to view employment within the minimal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), where employment is among the broad array of areas to be addressed within the transition process starting at age 16. Mandating the beginning of a career planning process no later than age 14 (such as in Rhode Island), helps ensure schools prioritize

competitive integrated employment for all students (à la Employment First) at an early age, that students develop an expectation of working during their formative teenage years, and that specific steps are taken toward developing a career path. The following are policy considerations for instituting such a practice:

- a) Outline a framework for appropriate employment planning activities aligned with the student's age and stage of employment and career development (i.e., activities at age 18 should not be the same as 14). Donald Super's stages of career development discussed in the first section can serve as a starting point for this framework.
- b) Require clear and consistent documentation of the career planning activities using standardized information collection instruments.
- c) In cases where a student is not currently interested in exploring employment options and career planning, practitioners should clearly document the reasons why, and develop a plan to address the issues and concerns of the student or family. The decision not to pursue employment should be revisited on a regular basis.

### Need for a variety of work experiences

Even when young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have work experiences as part of the transition process, those experiences are too often limited in the types of jobs and workplaces. For example, students get work experience at a limited number of sites chosen by the school, and there is sometimes over-reliance on school-based enterprises (e.g., coffee shops). The following are policy considerations for addressing this issue:

- a) A core value in identifying work experiences for students should be mirroring typical teenage work experiences.
- b) Many young people's early work experiences are not necessarily based on a highly person-centered approach and are often fairly random, based on what types of jobs are available, where their friends work, and the availability of slots in a youth employment program. Such an approach is not necessarily bad for students with disabilities (i.e., it is hard to figure out what you want to do until you start getting experience doing something). At the same time, it is important that work experiences maximize opportunities for students to make an informed choice among options, and that individual student's interests and personalities should drive even their early work experiences where an individual is performing tasks at a work site.

- c) Many schools have long-standing work sites in the community through which they will rotate individuals, with the business "hosting" students, and the jobs essentially belonging to the school, not the student. If such a structure is used, limit their use to early exploratory experiences, and ensure they are only one component of the overall employment experiences for students.
- d) Having students performing activities at a work site in a group may seem convenient and cost-effective, but is problematic in terms of the lack of individuality, inconsistency with typical work experiences, and the stigmatizing nature of such activities. Group employment and enclaves are not considered best practices, and policies should therefore place limitations on their use and size. An exception in this regard can be a group experience that includes students with and without disabilities (e.g., a summer youth employment program).
- e) Have a policy goal that every student leave school with at least one individualized employer-paid work experience.
- f) Often, there is a high reliance on work experiences within schools and at school-based enterprises. The challenge of such experiences is that they are limited in setting and do not expose young people to the world of employment outside of the school setting and the array of "real world" variables inherent within. This can limit students' opportunities to make connections for future employment experiences, while using significant school staff time and resources that would be better spent supporting experiences outside of school in the community. Therefore, explicit guidelines and policies regarding use of work experiences within schools are recommended. Considerations in such guidelines include:
  - Limits on the use of school-based work experiences within a clear philosophy that these are to be used strictly as "early exposure" work experiences that will lead to experiences in the community.
  - Use of school-based enterprises only if such opportunities are inclusive of students with and without disabilities.
  - Requiring clear documentation and administrative approval regarding why a student is participating in a school-based work experience vs. an experience out in the community.

## Allowing students to gain work experience in the community during school hours

Some school districts experience challenges in allowing students to gain hands-on work experience during school hours in regard to student learning requirements. The following are recommendations to address this issue:

- a) Examine the requirements in your state and district in terms of hours of learning and curriculum requirements.
- b) Determine how work-based learning can be incorporated within these requirements, and develop clear policies and procedures for community-based instruction.
- c) Ensure that work experiences are structured as true WBL experiences, with specific learning goals connected with the student's IEP, and connection with classroom instruction.
- d) Use standard WBL information collection tools (such as those discussed earlier) to document learning and progress.

## Liability concerns

Liability concerns, such as a student getting hurt while out in the community, having an accident during a work experience, or causing damage at a work site, are often concerns of schools and businesses. The following can assist in addressing this issue:

- a) Determine if the school or district allows other students (such as those in career and technical education), to go out into the community and to job sites during the school day. If so, determine how liability coverage is handled for those students. (Note: there should not be a double-standard. A student's disability should not preclude them from going into the community if other students are allowed to do so.)
- b) Work with your district's business office and insurance carrier to get proper liability and worker's compensation coverage in place. Clearly determine the parameters of insurance coverage requirements for schools and businesses based on state law. Be sure to look into any specific language regarding student work experiences. Then, determine how district insurance policies can provide necessary coverage.
- c) Upon gaining clarity regarding insurance coverage requirements and needs, schools should communicate clear policy language regarding liability coverage, so that this

information can be shared with businesses, families, and others.

## Staff competencies

Recognize that developing work-based learning opportunities and supporting students in them requires staff with a specific set of skills (i.e., just because someone is a good teacher or professional does not mean they are necessarily good at developing WBL opportunities or community supports). As such, develop personnel policies to ensure that school district staff have the necessary competencies. The following outlines areas to be addressed within these policies:

- a) Identify the competencies that staff need. Knowledge of WBL in general forms the basis for these competencies, with areas specific to supporting students with significant disabilities then incorporated. At the end of this publication is a list of general resources on work-based learning. For competencies specific to supporting students with significant disabilities, the [APSE Universal Competencies](#) can be a helpful guide.
- b) Determine how these competencies can be integrated within staff structures and roles. For larger school districts, an ideal option is to create positions dedicated to outreach and support for WBL based on the required competencies. If this is not an option, schools can incorporate these competencies into the job descriptions for staff who work with students on transition.
- c) Incorporate professional development requirements for staff into personnel policies. Identify training resources about best practices for WBL for students with significant disabilities.

## Integration within existing school-to-career efforts

Many school districts have existing school-to-career programs and connecting activities available to all students. Educators and staff working with students with significant disabilities should identify what exists within their school and district, and make every effort to fully include and support students with significant disabilities to fully participate. This type of integrated program is better than having a wholly separate program. Such efforts align with the goal of full inclusion, benefiting the students with and without disabilities and the businesses and organizations that are engaged in the school-to-work activities. Additional suggestions regarding inclusion in existing school-to-career and WBL

efforts include:

- a) Have a policy that all career development and school-to-career efforts within the school or district must be fully inclusive of students with disabilities.
- b) Check with your local workforce development board to identify what types of school-to-career activities they support. Work with the board staff to leverage these activities and include students with significant disabilities. Contact information for your local workforce development board is on [US Department of Labor's Career One Stop website](#). Your Local Workforce Development board oversees the American Job Centers (AJCs) in your area. You can also reach out directly to your local AJC, to determine what youth services they have available. AJC listings are also on the [Career One website](#).
- c) Find out if your state has a work-based learning program, with WBL resources and tools. Do an internet search with your state name and work-based learning, or contact your state department of education.

### Requirements for school personnel on-site at workplace

A major issue and challenge for schools supporting work-based learning is whether staff need to be on-site where students are getting work experience. There may be legitimate reasons for staff to be on-site, such as providing job coaching and monitoring student progress. At the same time, as noted earlier, presence of staff at job sites beyond what is truly necessary can be problematic for a variety of reasons:

- The need to have available personnel to cover a wide number of work sites.
- The negative impact of staff presence on natural supports in the workplace.
- The learned reliance of students on ongoing job coaching that will likely be unavailable for them as adults.

This is not an issue that may be easily and readily addressed, given school liability concerns and general policies about students unsupervised during school hours. However, the following are recommendations for consideration of policies to address this issue:

- a) Review state and district policies regarding requirements for student supervision during school hours, including for student internships. Gain clarity about what is and is not allowable that is not based on misplaced

presumptions or arbitrary administrative/educator decision-making.

- b) Determine where there is flexibility within existing requirements in terms of student supervision in the community, and whether there are opportunities to change existing policies.

### Transportation

Transportation continuously arises as a challenge for employment. The following are recommendations from a policy and partnership perspective to assist in addressing this issue:

- a) Consider mandating training on transportation as part of transition services. In training, emphasize empowering students with sufficient information and skills to self-manage their transportation to the greatest extent possible.
- b) Link with your local transportation systems and authorities at the county/municipal level to see what resources they have to assist with transportation needs, and to also make them aware of the transportation challenges the district faces.
- c) Build knowledge competency in transportation issues at a local level, as well as through various national resources. Transportation information is available on the [Employment First Massachusetts website](#).

### Wage and Hour Laws

In policies regarding work experiences, be clear about the need to abide by wage and hour laws. It is critical that school personnel understand the difference between volunteering, unpaid work experience, and paid work experience. States and districts should provide specific guidelines regarding adherence to wage and hour laws, as violations can be problematic for the schools and employers and students' rights. This publication from the Institute for Community Inclusion and SELN, [Volunteer, Internships, and Unpaid Work Experiences: What's Allowed](#), provides guidance regarding national wage and hour laws.

### Student Diploma Issues

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities face challenges in earning a high school diploma. A lack of a high school diploma is often a barrier to employment. States have experimented with various approaches to address this issue, including alternate diplomas and occupational certificates. No solution is ideal: alternate diplomas can be viewed as less worthy than a standard high

school diploma, and occupational and other types of certificates are not typically a high school diploma equivalent. As an evolving issue, states should consider the following:

- a) Determine what is permissible in your state for diploma alternatives and certificates. Some states (e.g., Massachusetts) only allow one diploma, while others may allow multiple diplomas.
- b) Use the experiences of other states to examine this issue and determine possible options.
- c) Consult with your business community to discuss the issue and determine possible options.

### **Incorporation of self-determination and informed choice within work-based learning**

It is crucial throughout the transition process and within work-based learning experiences to incorporate the principles and practices of self-determination and informed choice. [\*Per the Arc of the US\*](#), “People with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities have the same right to, and responsibilities that accompany, self-determination as everyone else. They are entitled to opportunities, respectful support, and the authority to exert control in their lives, to direct their services, and to act on their own behalf.” Informed choice is a key component of effective self-determination: the process of choosing from options based on accurate information, knowledge, and experiences. Teachers, staff, and family members have important roles in facilitating work-based learning, but it is the student’s interests, choices, and decisions that should ultimately drive the process, not the interests, choices and decisions of others. To ensure self-determination and informed choice within WBL, the following are recommended:

- a) Have a clear policy about the right to self-determination and informed choice for students regarding transition and WBL. Within this policy, include specific steps and guidelines for ensuring self-determination and informed choice. Examples of areas for self-determination and informed choice include: selection of WBL experiences; job and career choices; identification of supports, including assistive technology and accommodations; disclosure of disability; and development of work-based learning goals. The publication, [\*Employment and Employment Supports: A Guide to Ensuring Informed Choice for Individuals with Disabilities\*](#),

from the Institute for Community Inclusion, contains a variety of information that can be useful in developing policies and guidelines.

- b) Require training for staff on the principles and practices of self-determination and informed choice with transition.
- c) Provide instruction to students about their right to self-determination and informed choice.
- d) Skills in self-determination and informed choice evolve during the teenage years and into adulthood and are built over time through practice. During WBL, provide ongoing opportunities to develop and practice self-determination and informed choice.

### **Meaningful Partnerships with Families and Caregivers**

Families and caregivers are often a student’s first and most knowledgeable case manager and champion. They serve as the gatekeeper for services and programs. Effective family engagement is routinely cited as an essential component of a successful transition for youth with disabilities (NTACT Transition Taxonomy, NCWD-Youth Guideposts for Success). Unfortunately, school and employment program staff sometimes struggle with forming working partnerships with families. This can lead to miscommunication and underutilization of the family’s energy, knowledge, and support when it comes to work-based learning. Suggestions to increase the capacity of school and employment programs to build effective partnerships with families include:

- a) Implement focused strategic planning and staff training efforts on building effective family partnerships. Many programs do not have a solid plan for engaging families and do not provide regular staff training on working with families in the job development process. Doing so would increase the comfort level of staff and establish accountability measures for working with families.
- b) Center family engagement efforts around the outcomes your program wants to achieve. For example, if your program wishes to increase the number of community-based work experiences for students with high support needs, then establish family engagement activities that help meet that goal. This might include conducting family interviews to aide with assessments or showing families success stories to help change the narrative about their family member.

- c) Leverage community partnerships to help with training and outreach. School and employment programs should not feel like they have to address family engagement alone. There are many community-based advocacy and family training agencies that could assist in parent training, materials development, and outreach to underserved populations. For example, consider partnering with your [state's Parent Training and Information Center](#) to conduct listening sessions or workshops focused on employment.
- d) Clearly communicate to families about the benefits of WBL and the role they can play to help their student succeed. Families want to contribute to their loved one's transition and employment success, but they do not always know how. School and employment program staff should make establishing open communication with families a priority, and provide specific ways families can contribute to the work-based learning process. MPTE has a training curriculum developed in conjunction with the YES! Center, [Raising Expectations for Better Futures](#), that can be helpful in educating families about employment.

## Conclusion

For far too long, young people with significant disabilities have left school with little or no work experience, unprepared for successful employment as adults. Work experience during transition has been clearly demonstrated to be an important key to career success. Work-based learning ensures that not only do youth gain necessary work experience, but that those experiences serve as the building blocks for employment and career success as an adult. While WBL can be helpful for all youth, the deliberative and systematic approach of WBL is particularly important for students with significant disabilities to ensure they develop the ability to make informed choices about jobs and careers and have the necessary supports in place for success. Using the full array of strategies and recommendations discussed within this brief will help ensure that is the case, while putting the necessary structures in place for a strong, sustainable program. An individualized student-driven, person-centered approach is at the core of quality WBL, guided by a thoughtful and deliberate approach and staff who are knowledgeable and skilled in work-based learning. Quality WBL experiences during the transition years will help ensure not only employment success as adults for individual youth with significant disabilities, but will also help advance the overall movement toward a society that fully welcomes the gifts and talents of people with disabilities in the workplace, and fully includes them in the economic mainstream.

## Best Practices in Work-Based Learning

1. Experiences are individualized, and driven by student preferences and needs rather than availability.
2. Youth are fully involved in choosing and structuring their experiences.
3. Exposure is provided to wide range of jobs and careers including those outside of "traditional" youth employing industries.
4. Experiences are "age and stage appropriate", evolving along a continuum of increased intensity and engagement in the workplace.
5. Experiences are predominately at workplaces in the community, not school-based.
6. Work site learning is structured and links back to classroom instruction.
7. Strong business partnerships, with employers sharing learning goals of instructors and students.
8. Opportunities are provided to perform meaningful job tasks in the workplace that build career skills and knowledge.
9. Periodic assessment and feedback are built in.
10. Students have the opportunity for regular self-reflection.
11. Results and progress are well documented.
12. Outcomes are clear and measurable.
13. Experiences include opportunities for developing student self-determination and self-advocacy skills.
14. Students build networks and connections for post-secondary career success.
15. Students develop an understanding of their support needs and how to advocate for and address those needs.

## Work-Based Learning Resources

### Jobs For the Future (JFF)

JFF has a variety of resources on their website: [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org). These include:

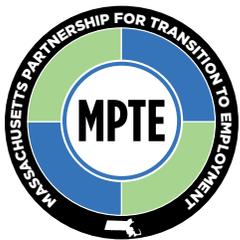
- Report: Making Work-Based Learning Work
- 7 Principles for Effective Work-Based Learning
- Work-Based Learning Framework
- Work-Based Learning Self-Assessment Tool
- Work-Based Learning System Development Guide

### U.S. Department of Education

- [Work Based Learning Toolkit](#)
- [Federal Partners in Transition: What to Know About Work-Based Learning for Students and Youth with Disabilities](#)

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