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Work-Based Learning and Future Employment for Youth: A Guide for Parents and Guardians

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Introduction

Setting high expectations early in life is an important step in order for youth to develop the skills to succeed in the future. Work-based learning is one way youth can identify interests, strengths, skills, and needs related to career development. A hands-on experience in a real setting, work-based learning includes a broad range of opportunities including short-term introductory activities such as job shadowing, informational interviews, and workplace tours, as well as more long-term and intensive training including workplace mentoring, apprenticeships, and paid employment. Volunteer work, service learning, and activities at a student's school site can also provide rich, work-based learning opportunities. Potential benefits of work-based learning for youth while they are still in school include:

- identification of career interests, skills, and abilities;
- exposure to job requirements and responsibilities, employer expectations, workplace etiquette, and workplace dynamics;
- development of critical workplace skills and a solid foundation for good work habits;
- improvement of postschool outcomes; and
- selection of appropriate courses of study tied to career goals.

Challenges and Strategies for Successful Work-Based Learning Experiences

Research has demonstrated that work-based learning is one of the best ways to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities in secondary education (Hughes, Moore, & Bailey, 1999). Youth who participate in such experiences have the opportunity to receive more individual guidance and support that will prepare them for successful adult employment. Youth with disabilities often face challenges that make it difficult to achieve successful employment as adults. These challenges are outlined below with proven strategies related to work-based learning that can be used to address them.

Challenge

Students do not see or understand a clear connection between what they are learning in school and expectations on the job.

Strategy for Success

A connection needs to be made between work experiences, appropriate work behavior, and student learning. Work-based learning offers young people meaningful hands-on learning opportunities by connecting classroom learning with work experience. This kind of learning opportunity can help a young person make better career decisions, select more appropriate courses of study, and develop job skills relevant to future employment. Through combined work and study experiences, students can enhance their academic knowledge, strengthen work skills, and increase their understanding of the workplace, achieving both personal development and professional preparation.

Work-based learning experiences can have a positive impact on school achievement and outcomes. Students who participate in work-based learning show an increase in completion of related coursework as well as an increase in attendance and graduation rates (Colley & Jamison, 1998). Work-based learning during secondary school also leads to higher rates of adult employment success for all categories of disability (Luecking & Fabian, 2000).

Table 1. **Employer Expectations of Student Workers**	
The student worker should:	
• Come to work on time	• Take personal responsibility
• Be a team player	• Stay on task and complete all work in a timely manner
• Be positive (don't complain or whine)	• Come to work appropriately dressed
• Ask for help when needed	• Keep personal visits to a minimum
• Be courteous and friendly	• Be reliable and follow through
• Use office equipment for work-related tasks only	• Ask for more work when tasks are complete
• When voicing concerns, be constructive (not accusatory)	• Use good personal hygiene
• Complete all work neatly and accurately	• Keep absences to a minimum and be sure to call in when sick
• Show respect for yourself and others	• Work HARD!
• Keep personal telephone calls to a minimum	

Challenge

Students lack the basic employability skills necessary for career success.

Strategy for Success

Early work-based learning experiences can help students build crucial job-keeping skills or *soft skills*. Many employers report that they want employees who are ready and eager to learn, show respect, and take their job commitment seriously. While jobs in today's economy require that employees be able to solve problems, use technology, and be proficient in reading, writing, math, and speaking skills, it is the soft skills that seem to make the difference in whether or not an employer hires and keeps someone on the job (Bremer & Madzar, 1995; Rentner, 2001). Specifically, employers want employees who display positive social skills including a strong work ethic, self-discipline, self-respect, a friendly demeanor, and reliability (Bremer & Madzar, 1995). **Table 1** provides a sample list of the soft skills employers typically expect from workers.

Employers expect and demand professionalism from their employees. Students need to be responsible for their behavior and performance on the job. Young people have a responsibility to do the job, communicate their needs, follow through on commitments, follow directions, and learn as much as they can about the work environment and the job (Gramlich, 1999a). Including goals that address the development of job-keeping skills in students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) will increase their chances of success once they enter the adult world of work. Students and their IEP team can develop work-based learning goals to support proficiency in these soft skills. This may include mentoring from an employee at the worksite, one-on-one guidance from teachers and adult mentors, role-playing, and group problem-solving sessions among students.

Challenge

Students' IEPs do not include clearly defined and appropriate work-based learning opportunities.

Strategy for Success

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act supports the practice of providing work experiences to youth with disabilities while still in high school (Storms, O'Leary, & Williams 2000). Students must gain the necessary skills and competencies they need in order to achieve success in adult life. Work-based learning experiences help students to achieve their desired goals in career preparation. Young adults and their families should be included as participants in the planning process so that work-based experiences match their desired interests and career goals.

Challenge

Students are not actively involved in their career and transition planning, as well as their selection of work-based learning opportunities.

Strategy for Success

At the Third National Forum on Education: Education and Life—Transitions, the New Brunswick (Canada) Youth Apprenticeship Program identified student responsibility as an essential element within the transition process. It developed a contract in which students agree to: "Accept and assume responsibility for preparing their future involvement in the workplace, by making informed choices about employment prospects based on an assessment of their abilities and potential, and by making every effort to acquire and improve the required

Student Success Story

At age 15, Christian did not have the academic skills to compete in the classroom, and he was feeling very defeated in the school environment. Christian was independent in the community and had some very good job skills. He was from a large family, and taking responsibility for chores was part of his daily activities at home. Then Christian started work-based learning.

As part of his education and IEP, Christian spent most of the school day at community job sites. For almost two years, his work was unpaid, although some jobs were funded through Carl Perkins funds. Some of his jobs were in food service, mail distribution, grounds keeping, and retail work. Once on the job and earning money, Christian increased his math skills and kept a checkbook with fairly good accuracy. He loved working and being out in the community.

> "My son really needed to feel that he was good at something, that he could learn and do a job independently. He also needed a more hands-on learning experience."
>
> – Kris Peterson, Christian's mom

By age 18, Christian had many good job skills and work habits. A person-centered planning meeting was held with his family, the school staff, rehabilitation services, and county human services staff. Christian wanted to be a chef, and although he could not complete the full chef program at the technical college, Christian participated in the hands-on components of the chef program for two years. He improved his cutlery handling skills and has been employed as a prep chef ever since.

Now a grown man, Christian is living in an apartment with a roommate, making $9.75 an hour, working 35 hours a week, and no longer receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Most importantly, he feels productive and has good self-esteem.

employability and specialized skills" (CMEC, 1998, p. 16). Assessments to inform transition planning for youth and families can clarify the shift from classroom to work-based learning.

Moreover, young adults must also develop competency in the areas of self-advocacy and leadership. These skills can be learned and practiced through successful work-based learning experiences and will help young adults take responsibility in their career development and employment as well as other areas of their lives. Self-advocacy and leadership identified as goals on students' IEPs may help them be responsible, competent, and ultimately successful in their future employment endeavors.

Challenge
Lack of family involvement and support for work-based learning as a part of career and transition planning.

Strategy for Success
Throughout elementary and middle school, many families focus on success in a classroom or in remedial interventions for reading, writing, and math. When the question is raised about community and work-based learning, many families do not see it as part of the school experience. However, families play a key role as job developers and advocates in marketing their children's skills and abilities. Parents and family should look within their own networks—neighbors, colleagues, and extended family members—to seek opportunities for their children. Networks are often excellent sources for initial work-based learning experiences because of the personal connections.

IEP teams may help families to become advocates and utilize their networks by:

- including them as equal partners in the transition planning process;
- supporting family in taking a leadership role in the development of their child's IEP; and
- including work-based learning experiences in the IEP.

Family members need solid support, good resources, and one-on-one assistance from teachers and school staff to heighten their ability to make a difference with regard to their child's career development experience.

Challenge
Students and families lack adequate knowledge of work incentives that apply to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and they fear that any employment will result in loss of benefits.

Strategy for Success
Transition planning team members (teachers, rehabilitation counselors, human service social workers) need accurate information regarding Social Security work incentives and the impact of wages on benefits. One of the best ways to accomplish this is for schools to make connections with employment specialists at the nearest Social Security office or through benefits analysis organizations available in some states. Students and families can make informed choices about work-based learning and employment if they know about the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS), Impairment Related Work Expense (IRWE), and the new rules regarding SSDI and maintaining medical assistance. A benefits analysis professional or employment specialist may calculate the impact of wages on benefits for the student and family and present that information at an IEP meeting. In addition, families also need knowledge regarding how to report employment to the Social Security Administration when a student has worked for several years as part of his or her IEP.

Conclusion
As illustrated by Christian's story, work-based learning opportunities can lead to successful employment outcomes. Real-world work experiences provide youth with an opportunity to develop not only work skills but also an understanding of the workplace. Varied and multiple exposures to the world of work can help to shape future work goals and habits. Work-based learning experiences are part of the career preparation that allows students to achieve their desired goals. Work-based learning experiences contribute to successful transition and ultimately, success in adult employment. Youth, their families, and IEP teams need to work together to ensure quality work-based learning experiences—tailored to individual interests, skills, and needs.

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Web Resources

Job Accommodation Network
http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/

National Center for Work-Based Learning Partnerships
http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/ncwblp/

One-Stop
http://www.careeronestop.org

Worksupport.com
http://www.worksupport.com/

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