

Work-Based Learning

Promoting Successful Transitions for Students with Disabilities

Work-based learning (WBL) is a term for activities that collaboratively engage employers and schools in providing structured learning experiences for students. These experiences assist students in developing broad, transferable skills for postsecondary education and workplace. A quality WBL program can make school-based learning more relevant by providing students with opportunities to apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to adult life.

WBL occurs in the workplace and classroom, making career exploration and development more efficient and natural by connecting learning in school to its application in the workplace. At the business or community organization work-based learning site, the emphasis is on learning rather than productivity. Concurrent classroom instruction focuses on academic and technical skills needed for career development and employment.

How Do Students Learn About the World of Work?

Younger children learn about careers informally via the internet, television, and movies, from family, neighbors, and interaction with community professionals, as well as from classmates and friends.

Preteens and young teens might explore areas of interest and talents by visiting actual workplaces, talking to employers and employees, job shadowing, searching online for information about careers of interest on sites such as CareerZone (www.careerzone.ny.gov), and participating in school-based enterprises such as school-sponsored sales of goods and services.

Older teens benefit from experiences, such as service-learning, apprenticeships, internships, paid employment, and entrepreneurship experiences.

How Does Work-Based Learning Relate to Post-School Success?

Two predictors of positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities are participation in work study, a “...specified sequence of work skills instruction and experiences designed to develop students’ work attitudes and general work behaviors by providing students with mutually supportive and integrated academic and vocational instruction” and paid work, “...any activity that places the student in an authentic workplace, and could include: work sampling, job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships,

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and paid employment. Paid employment can include existing standard jobs in a company or organization or customized work assignments negotiated with the employer, but these activities always feature competitive pay (e.g., minimum wage paid directly to the student by the employer.” ~ National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT).

Why is Work-Based Learning Important for Students with Disabilities?

WBL experiences help students with disabilities make connections between knowledge and skills obtained in the classroom and the world of work. In today’s economy, careers that result in a living wage require additional education and training. Career exposure and work experiences are essential to help youth in transition learn workplace behavior and apply academic and specialized technical skills necessary to thrive in today’s complex economy.

What Should Comprehensive WBL Programs Include?

- Identification of student interests and preferences;
- Age-appropriate career and vocational assessment;
- Career pathways leading to self-sufficient levels of income;
- Postsecondary education learning opportunities; and
- On-the-job training to improve job and workplace skills.

Regardless of their graduation pathway, WBL helps students make connections between classroom learning and skills needed to succeed in

their career of interest. Students who participate in work-based learning show an increase in completion of related coursework, improved attendance, and higher graduation rates. Direct experience in the workplace engages students more effectively than book-oriented, teacher-driven, abstract instruction¹.

Inclusion + Work-Based Learning = Better Outcomes

Participation in general education settings, including those that provide WBL opportunities, result in better outcomes for students with disabilities. Students who participate in occupational education and special education in integrated settings are more likely to be competitively employed than students who have not participated in such activities². Opportunities for inclusion in integrated WBL should be provided to all students based on an assessment of individual skills and interests.

Real work for real pay is the “gold standard” of transition outcomes for students with disabilities. Paid employment during high school increases the likelihood that the student will find competitive, integrated employment after high school³.

¹ National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (n.d.) Work Study Correlated with Improved Employment Outcomes. Retrieved on October 18, 2018 from: https://www.transitionta.org/system/files/resourcetrees/PD_WS_Predictor_2015.pdf

² Mazzotti, V.I, Rowe, D. A., Sinclair, J., Poppen, M., Woods, W., & Shearer, M. L. (2015). Predictors of post-school success: A systematic review of NLTS-2 secondary analyses. Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals. 10.1177/2165143415588047

³ Carter, E. W., Austin, D., & Trainor, A. A. (2012). Predictors of postschool employment outcomes for young adults with severe disabilities. Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 23(1), 50-63.

Additional Resources

New York State WBL Programs:

www.p12.nysed.gov/cte/wbl/home.html

WBL and Career Development Occupational Studies (CDOS):

www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/multiple-pathways/memos/cdos-graduation-pathway-option.html

WBL and Labor Laws:

www.dol.gov/whd/FOH/FOH_Ch64.pdf

Research in Support of WBL:

www.transitionta.org

www.transitionta.org/node/672

www.transitionta.org/node/695

Learn More:

www.transitionsource.org/work-based-learning