

Uncovering Pathways: A Career Planning Process for Students with Significant Disabilities

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Introduction

Youth with disabilities face many barriers in making the transition from high school to competitive employment. The U.S. Department of Labor reported that upwards of 80% of people ages 16-64 with disabilities are neither employed nor working towards employment compared to 36% for others (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). “Although entry into the world of work is a prominent marker of post-school success, young people with severe disabilities often leave high school without the skills, supports, and connections that lead to meaningful employment” (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012, p.58).

As teachers, we are constantly aware that career planning that aligns with interests for students with significant disabilities is the cornerstone for positive post-school outcomes. Yet limited research exists on an individualized career planning process that will assist these students in uncovering a desired career pathway. To fully understand an effective process, it is important to focus on the question “What are the characteristics of an effective career planning approach for students with significant disabilities?” This brief presents research designed to answer this question and discusses implications for practice.

What The Research Tells Us

Research on employment success for youth with disabilities identified two factors associated with employment two years post high school: high parent expectations and hands-on, authentic work experiences (Carter et al., 2012). Increasing family and school expectations that students can work and have the ability to contribute to the workforce will greatly impact post-school success.

Findings from a longitudinal study showed that youth with disabilities “whose parents expected they would be employed after high school were 58 times more likely to be employed up to 2 years out of high school” (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Research also indicated work experience, whether paid or unpaid, has been consistently identified as the most important predictor of post-school employment success for students with disabilities, regardless of disability or intensity of special

education services (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2017; Carter et al., 2012). In fact, paid work experience during adolescence is consistently identified as a prominent predictor of better post-school outcomes (Carter et al., 2012).

It has long been held that collaboration among families, professionals, and service systems is an important component of effective programs that support the transition of youth with disabilities from school to work and adult life (Wehman, 2013). To reach successful employment outcomes, experts in effective employment practices recommend identifying student gifts and talents, including families in planning, arranging for supports, and finding tasks that best fit job seekers' strengths and interests (Migliori, Nye-Lengerman, Lyons, Bose, & Butterworth, 2018). By learning more about students and their conditions for success, student teams can effectively plan for work-based learning experiences and independent living skills in the home, school, and community environments to increase skills and independence.

Implications for Practice

After reviewing research and utilizing findings, it is apparent that a students' IEP team must set a foundation for success prior to implementing the career planning process for students with significant disabilities. The following will provide an answer to the pressing question "What are the characteristics of an effective career planning process for students with significant disabilities?"

SET A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

Employment for All

Adopt and implement the Employment First initiative. Promote employment in the general workforce for all students with disabilities—real jobs, real wages.

High Expectations

Set high expectations for students and embrace the belief that all students are capable and will become employed.

Family Engagement

Encourage families to expose students to various tasks, environments, and careers. Collaborate and share strategies and observations of student abilities and interests.

Collaborate and Connect

Support the belief that students, family members, school staff, service agencies, and employers all have a role in the career planning process. Connect families to community agencies and resources early.

CAREER PLANNING PROCESS

Based on the findings of the research, the following characteristics are recommended for an effective career planning approach with students who have more significant disabilities.

Apply the Process of Discovery

Apply the process of Discovery, a person-centered approach, to reveal student strengths, interests, skills, and support needs prior to discussing potential careers, work-based learning experiences, and employment opportunities.

Explore Opportunities

Expose students to multiple and inclusive career exploration opportunities within the home, school, and community that have relevance, purposeful focus, and specific exploration and learning outcomes.

Allow Choice and Decision Making

Provide opportunities for students to contribute feedback on work performance, work interests, and preferences. Allow choice in determining next steps with career exploration.

Prepare and Train

Develop on-the-job training experiences and paid employment opportunities in the student's career area of choice to increase occupational knowledge and 21st century skills prior to exiting school.

Conclusions

Research has yet to divulge a universal process to career planning that will lead to successful outcomes for students with more significant disabilities. However, findings did reveal several beliefs and practices that are essential for setting a strong foundation in the career planning process for students with significant disabilities.

To decrease the barriers youth with disabilities face in transitioning from high school to competitive employment, it is necessary for the student's team to utilize a person-centered approach to uncovering student strengths, interests, skills, and support needs prior to discussing potential careers. The team should collaborate to develop work-based learning experiences that sequentially build upon each other to lead students through awareness, exploration, preparation, and training toward a meaningful career pathway of interest.

References

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