

Embrace Employment First Practices

For many, employment brings greater independence, improved self-esteem, and connections with co-workers. These benefits are even more important for individuals with disabilities who are often excluded from opportunities to work. Policies such as Employment First help promote inclusive practices that support employment outcomes.

What is Employment First?

Employment First is a nationwide framework based on the belief that everyone is capable of work and, therefore, employment should be prioritized as the first option for individuals with disabilities. Virginia supports this philosophy for all people and is committed to shifting the narrative about who can achieve competitive, integrated employment. The goal is for individuals with disabilities to have the opportunity to work along with others without disabilities and to receive the same pay as others who are doing similar work.

Adopting an Employment First Approach

As school and community professionals, we can embrace Employment First practices by raising our own expectations and prioritizing inclusive workplaces. We can also create conditions and opportunities for our students and their families to dream big and set goals for life after high school. To make employment a reality, school personnel, families, community agencies, and business partners must support the Employment First philosophy.

Strategies to Support Employment First

To be effective, Employment First practices should begin early and be revisited often. Educators can start by applying these practices in school, at home, and in the community.

School

- Model and share Employment First principles with school personnel and families.
- Believe that everyone who chooses to work can work with the appropriate supports.
- Set high expectations for competitive, integrated employment.
- Implement effective career-development practices.
- Promote self-determination and self-advocacy.

- Encourage student-centered career planning.
- Partner to create student- and family-led employment goals.
- Collaborate with CTE educators, school counselors, families, and community agencies.
- Partner with DARS to coordinate Pre-Employment Transition Services.

Home

- Provide workplace readiness activities and support progress on skill development.
- Explore job shadowing, volunteering, and work opportunities in your community.
- Discuss the benefits of work with students and families.
- Believe that work is possible for all students.
- Help families develop students' job readiness skills through chores.
- Connect students and families with those who are successfully employed.
- Guide students and families in identifying strengths, preferences, interests, and needs.

Community

- Communicate expectations for Employment First with employers and businesses.
- Collaborate with stakeholders to develop goals for increased student employment.
- Offer students a variety of work experiences in diverse work environments.
- Promote student success stories about integrated employment within newsletters, presentations, websites, and social media.
- Build community partnerships with area businesses.
- Ask stakeholders about employment opportunities and connections to employers.

Conclusion

Everyone plays a role in promoting competitive, integrated employment for students with disabilities. Educators who use Employment First practices can impact successful outcomes in school, at home, and in the community.

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