

A Portrait of Paid Employment Pathways for High School Students with Extensive Support Needs

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Schutz, M. A., Awsumb, J. M., Burgess, L., Hrvatin, J., and Carter, E. W. (2026). A portrait of paid employment pathways for high school students with extensive support needs. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 64(1), 26-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10522263251394326>

A Quick Look

Paid work experience during high school contributes to positive postsecondary employment outcomes for students with disabilities, including students with extensive support needs (ESN). This article summarizes a study focused on the employment experiences of high school students with ESN. Further, it identifies strategies and patterns that support successful employment opportunities.

Key Findings

This study followed the work experiences of 15 students with ESN whose teams participated in a school-based intervention. Key aspects of the intervention included:

1. Job development training for educators
2. Employment Planning Meeting with student presentations about their goals for employment
3. Job searches conducted by the Employment Planning team, which includes the student, their family, educators, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and Pre-ETS providers
4. Team meetings in coordination with the student's exit meeting to plan continued supports

Participating students found jobs in a variety of workplaces, including restaurants, retail, animal clinics, fitness centers, and schools. Ongoing support included job coaching, help from natural workplace supports, such as coworkers and supervisors, regular communication within the team, and transportation assistance. The positive employment results identified in this study highlight the benefit of implementing person-centered planning early, both during transition planning in school and continuing after individuals exit school. Additionally, the study emphasized the collaboration and communication within the interagency teams. This collaboration aided in building student self-determination, facilitating natural supports in the workplace, and building effective communication between workplace personnel and families.

The study showed that person-centered employment planning helped students find jobs that matched their interests and were meaningful to them. It also highlighted the importance of strong collaboration among the transition team, which helped build students' self-determination. Additionally, natural supports in the workplace helped students succeed on the job. Regular communication among workplace staff, families, and the transition team strengthened partnerships and provided continued support for student success.

Another important finding was that students were more successful at work when their jobs matched their interests. Employment planning meetings played a key role in making this happen. During these meetings, the team discussed the student's interests, strengths, goals, and preferred work environment. Using this information, the team worked together to find a job that was a good fit for the student, increasing the likelihood of long-term success.

Putting It Into Practice

We can learn from these results. The intervention used in this study was rooted in person-centered planning performed by interagency teams. Coordinating interagency teams across multiple meetings, as implemented in this study, may seem like a significant investment of time. The results show that it is worth the effort. Person-centered planning places student goals and interests at the heart of the job search. Because the teams are interagency, they provide opportunities for families and adult service providers to build connections and communication.

Researchers noted that educators may need training and support to implement person-centered planning for early employment for students with ESN. This is an important consideration for school division leaders as they plan to implement similar practices.

We can improve our practices by using what we learned from these results. Person-centered planning focuses on each student's strengths, interests, and goals and should begin early in the transition process. When team members communicate regularly and work together intentionally, stronger partnerships are built, leading to more successful outcomes for students. Additionally, as students gain skills and confidence on the job, job coaching can be faded and replaced by natural support from supervisors and coworkers. This leads to increased student independence at work.

Where To Go from Here?

Looking forward, this research could be expanded to include more students. Additionally, the researchers acknowledge that a lack of student perspectives was a limitation of their study. It would be beneficial for future researchers to incorporate opportunities for student voice. An additional perspective of interest would be those of vocational rehabilitation counselors or other adult agency providers supporting students in the workplace.