Strategies for Creating Work-Based Learning Experiences in Schools for Secondary Students With Disabilities

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TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 47, No. 6, pp. 352–358. Copyright 2015 The Author(s). DOI: 10.1177/0040059915580033

Ms. Hinson is a high school special education teacher. She provides learning strategies instruction for 9th and 10th graders to support their success in English and social studies courses. Ms. Hinson is frustrated that her students do not have scheduled time to work on skills related to their specific careers, much less work experiences, during the school day. Students may have already had opportunities for self-exploration in elementary school through interest activities; now she wants to help them explore career options specific to their abilities and interests. She is concerned that her students do not have access to experiences that will enhance their planning for and success in the future: This is a challenge for many secondary special education teachers. During two recent individualized education program (IEP) meetings, Ms. Hinson was unable to identify how to incorporate any work-based learning activity into the general curriculum for either student. She decided that day that she needed help to make changes to her program.

Nationally, the recent focus has been on adopting state-developed standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics that build toward college and career readiness. Of the states that have elected to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012), states either (a) updated their existing standards and worked with their university system to certify that mastery of those standards would eliminate the need for students to take remedial courses upon admission to postsecondary institutions within the system or (b) worked with other states to develop common standards that build toward college and career readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Although not all states have adopted the CCSS, most have engaged in a review and update to instructional standards for ELA and mathematics in the last few years. As the economy has changed, many traditional career technical education (CTE) programs have moved from helping students prepare for a specific job, possibly associated with limited growth opportunity, to helping them prepare for a career with the expectation of advancement (National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium [NASDCTEc], 2012). As part of this movement, national organizations such as the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, state consortia, and industry-based organizations have created sets of standards for student learning in career technical programs. The Common Career Technical Core (2014) is a set of rigorous, high-quality benchmark standards for CTE. The goal of the Common Career Technical Core is to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a global economy.

To be college and career ready, high school graduates are required to complete a rigorous and broad curriculum that is grounded in the core academic disciplines but includes other subjects that are part of a well-rounded education (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2013). Career readiness adds to this definition by including academic and technical knowledge and skills, including employability knowledge, skills, and dispositions. For example, a career-ready person knows his or her interests, strengths, and weaknesses with an understanding of the skills

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necessary for engaging in today's economy. These skills include goal setting and planning, clear and effective communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, working in teams and as individuals, effective use of technology, and decision making (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2013).

For students with disabilities, the individualized education program (IEP) provides a process for ensuring access and success in courses and experiences to provide students with the skills necessary for career and college readiness. The process of fine-tuning a transition-age student's IEP through the course of the secondary school experience is benefited by students engaging in numerous opportunities to make informed decisions about their futures. Work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) are a valuable source for such experiences not only for students across the spectrum of disability but also for students without disabilities.

Despite legislation promoting transition from school to postschool employment, students with disabilities continue to be employed as adults at lower rates when compared to their peers without disabilities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Employment contributes heavily to developing positive and stable adult identities, quality of life, subjective well-being, and future career success and potential earnings (Levin & Wagner, 2005; Shandra & Hogan, 2008). National policy makers and researchers have invested in school-based interventions to improve postsecondary employment and career possibilities for students with disabilities (Gold, Fabian, & Luecking, 2013). The U.S. Department of Labor (2013) has noted that all students need information on career options, including career assessments, structured exposure to employment opportunities, and training designed to improve job-seeking skills and workplace basic skills (sometimes called *soft skills*). Research has shown positive correlations between individual, programmatic, and contextual factors and improved school-to-work outcomes for students with disabilities.

For example, Test et al. (2009) conducted a systematic review of the secondary transition correlational literature to identify in-school predictors of improved postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. Based on the results of this review, evidence-based in-school predictors of postschool outcomes were identified (National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2013). Of the predictors identified, only four predicted improved outcomes in all postsecondary goal areas identified for planning in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, employment, postsecondary education, independent living—namely, inclusion in general education, work experience and paid employment, self-care and independent living skills, and student support.

Since 1985, research has consistently indicated that when students with disabilities participate in WBLEs (e.g., career awareness, work study, paid employment), their postschool outcomes are likely to improve (Carter, Austin, Trainor, 2011; Test et al., 2009). As a result, it is critical for students with disabilities to have these experiences as part of their high school transition services. WBLEs help school systems achieve elements of college and career-ready reforms. For example, a student's workplace assignment will be based on a learning plan to which the student, school, and employer have all concurred, and the student's progress in that assignment will be monitored on a regular basis. Also, staff will be supported by a system that recognizes that it takes time and resources to develop effective partnerships and work-based learning opportunities (Youth to Work Coalition, 2011).

Identifying and engaging appropriate organizations in the community to provide WBLEs takes time, commitment, and hard work. WBLEs can be seen as part of a larger process of career development for all students. Through WBLEs, students learn about various career areas, try different work styles, find out what type of work they enjoy, discover how they learn in a job setting, and find out what natural supports are available, as well as help school systems improve postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. Understanding different types of WBLEs can help educators plan for meaningful opportunities. Luecking (2009) identified seven WBLEs: career exploration, job shadowing, job sampling, service learning, internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment. Figure 1 provides a timeline for implementing WBLEs, as developed by the Youth to Work Coalition (2011).

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Career Exploration

Figure 1 suggests that career exploration is one of the earliest WBLEs and that it bridges students' knowledge of themselves to that of possible careers. ELA teachers teach concepts related to comparisons, and students explore and compare several career choices. As a teacher of ninth graders, Ms. Hinson could have her students create a KWL (know, want, learn) chart on two possible career interests. Many middle school curricula include a semester course related to career exploration; it is critical that the career interest inventories and online career research in that curriculum be offered to all students in middle schools. In addition, academic standards are increasingly focused on students understanding the application of the concept in the world of work. As

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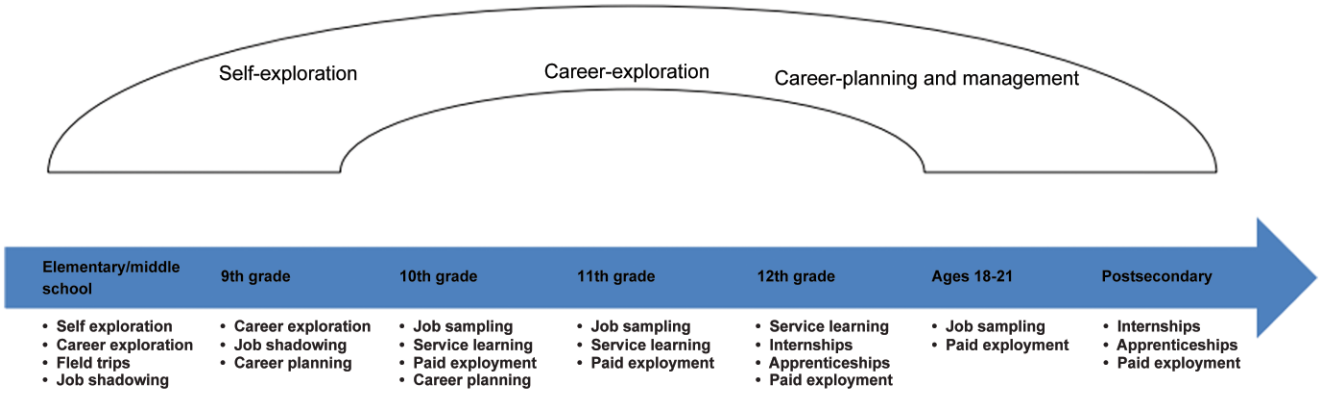
Figure 1. Timeline for implementing work-based learning experiences



general education math, science, health, and other content teachers provide instruction on careers associated with specific concepts, they are engaging students in career exploration—the first phase of WBLEs.

For students with disabilities, transition specialists may have students complete online career searches (e.g., O*Net, CareerShip) to gain knowledge of skills needed for a particular field, including expected education or training, and thriving locations or related industries for that career. For example, students could explore the hospitality and tourism career cluster and learn about jobs that are available in restaurants and food and beverage services, as well as hotel and civic centers. Students could describe the work they enjoy, observe jobs in that workplace, reflect on these experiences, and identify their own work values and interests gained through the online research experience. The following are ways that teachers can implement career exploration activities:

- Conduct company tours or field trips to local businesses of interest to students.
- Help students interview employers, and facilitate follow-up discussions with youth about what they saw, heard, and learned.
- Host "career day" presentations through local business organizations or corporate volunteer associations.
- Participate in planning or encourage student attendance at a career fair, including college admissions offices, disability services from colleges, employers, employment agencies, and a system for students to gather information and practice interviewing and résumé development skills.
- Search for lesson plans on career awareness on vocational web sites, and align to the current pacing guide or standards within the curriculum.
- Make frequent connections between academic content and career and life applications in elementary, middle, and early high school grades.

> Career exploration may involve visits by youth to workplaces to learn about jobs and the skills required to perform them. Visits and meetings with employers and people in identified occupations, outside of the workplace, are also types of career exploration activities from which youth can learn about jobs and careers. (Luecking, 2009, p. 13)

Each suggestion above can be completed and research, oral presentation, and writing assignments used to document student participation and increased knowledge aligned with expected grade-level demonstration of ELA standards. Within specific career fields, these activities align with industry certification expectations and, depending on the career explored, may also align with standards in math, science, or technology.

Job Shadowing

Job shadowing is "extended time, often a full workday or several workdays, spent by a youth in a workplace accompanying an employee in the performance of his or her daily duties" (Luecking, 2009, p. 13). One way that students can learn the requirements of a job is to spend a day with someone who is performing the job. For example, students can shadow an employee of a company, chosen by the student and facilitated by the teacher, to see all the duties of a specific job completed. Students would prepare a presentation or participate in a discussion on what they learned about the company and the job during the experience. Less formal examples of job shadowing would be "take your child to work" day sponsored by many schools and communities. These job-shadowing experiences provide opportunities for students to see workplace circumstances and gain initial knowledge about employment. Again, Figure 1 identifies job shadowing as an early WBLE, which can be addressed in elementary, middle, and early high school years.

Ms. Hinson was able to identify several lessons and units in which she could incorporate career exploration; however, she knows that she has no control over what happens beyond the four walls of her classroom in her students' lives. She decides to plan a project-based unit in which her students will have the opportunity to engage in observing a community member at work—a parent, a neighbor, a cooperative community business—or work with staff in the school to arrange an on-campus job-shadowing experience. She will connect with the community through outreach efforts on

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her part along with school administrators and other personnel, as well as an informational flyer and permission forms. Ms. Hinson decides that this is a project that she and her students can manage and can definitely allow her students to demonstrate specific research and written and oral communication skills reflected in her state's ELA standards.

If educators need assistance in creating a job-shadowing program, the local chamber of commerce, the city's community involvement agency, or a business and education committee frequently offers resources. Spend thoughtful time planning this program, making sure to define the program goals and choosing how to best implement into the curriculum and reach out to local employers. Always evaluate your program and advertise your success. Teachers can implement the following to facilitate job-shadowing opportunities for students:

- Create a job-shadowing day.
- Arrange job-shadowing opportunities independently or in collaboration with other school and business personnel.
- Hold a disability mentoring day in partnership with local business or disability leadership organizations.
- Investigate this with associated CTE personnel and medical providers. For example, in the medical field, "preceptorship" is a period of practical experience and training that are supervised by an expert or specialist in the field.

Again, identifying time away from the classroom is a challenge, but by thoughtfully and collaboratively developing a comprehensive job-shadowing plan with program goals and aligning with standards in specific CTE courses, as well as math, science, social studies, technology, and ELA, these experiences provide all students with opportunities to simultaneously gain academic and nonacademic competence.

Work Sampling

Work sampling is "work by a youth that does not materially benefit the employer but allows the youth to spend meaningful time in a work environment to learn aspects of potential job task and soft skills required in the workplace" (Luecking, 2009, p. 13). This is also called *job sampling* by employers and educators. As noted in Figure 1, job sampling is recommended for students in approximately 10th and 11th grades. The following are steps that teachers can take to implement work-sampling activities:

Use the online tools already developed and utilize career assessments to match students' interests and abilities with potential careers *(e.g., O*Net, CareerShip)*.

Rotate students through various community- and school-based work-sites. For example, CTE teachers could identify community sites based on career cluster interest for a rotation. Just as job sampling allows students to observe specific school-based jobs for a portion of a day (e.g., cafeteria, custodial, retail, customer service, clerical, instructional, administrative), a team of teachers may develop a schedule for a student or small group of students to assist with on-campus jobs for 1-week intervals. Such jobs in a high school can include:

- cleaning tables and floors in the cafeteria;
- posting breakfast and lunch menus daily;
- sweeping and mopping hallways;
- campus beautification;
- working in the school store, the book fair, a Parent–Teacher Association fund-raising event, the concession stand at sporting events;
- providing directions or programs for school plays or other after-hours events;
- answering phones or responding to visitors in the school office;
- delivering messages from the office to staff and students;
- managing the technology for audio, video, or online information sharing from the school;
- typing and entering nonsensitive data;
- managing materials for a classroom;
- creating visual displays with and for teachers in their classrooms and hallways;
- managing materials for extracurricular activities;
- peer tutoring with specific guidance from teachers; and
- participating in school-based committees or teams for school improvement.

Teachers who have limited access to community trips can have those professionals set up booths in the gymnasium at the school and have students rotate through each booth, with an assignment to gather specific information from each professional.

Create opportunities with employers for students to practice various job tasks. Within each cluster in Common Career Technical Core, there are standards that reflect the application of specific academic content to real-world and career demonstration. A culinary arts teacher could invite a local chef to demonstrate skills recently taught in the curriculum and include a segment that requires students to practice the skill. Of course, using simulations within the classroom to work on skills related to career clusters is important too. For example, mathematics teachers could consult with the culinary arts teacher to create word problems that demonstrate skills needed for culinary careers.

Administer career interest and aptitude assessments, and use the results to place students in short-term unpaid work experiences so they can gain more information about the skills needed for success in that career.

Develop a network of potential unpaid workplace experiences. For example, work with CTE teachers, other schools, local businesses, churches, and cultural centers to create community-level teams to support the school efforts of WBLEs.

Teachers of students who are pursuing alternate achievement standards can *develop a school-based enterprise* (e.g., coffee shop, school store, recycling program), which teaches students specific skills addressed in their IEPs. These work-sampling opportunities, however, can be extended to students with or without IEPs by providing course credit for demonstrating competencies specific to

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math, ELA, science, technology, social studies, health, or CTE.

Ms. Hinson is convinced that work-sampling activities are outside the scope of her ELA instruction; however, she decides that she can approach her CTE colleagues to investigate what programs they have in place and see how she can develop assignments that reinforce the specific job skills that students are learning in their various placements.

Service Learning

Service learning is "hands-on volunteer service to the community that integrates with course objectives. It is a structured process that provides time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge required" (Luecking, 2009, p. 13). For students with disabilities, teachers can align service learning experiences with transition assessment data. For example, if students are interested in the environment, they could design projects that affect the environment in a positive way, including restoration, cleanup of local landmarks, or promotion of more environmentally friendly practices at school. If a student is interested in public safety, the projects may include preparing for and recovering from disasters, supporting the military and veterans or victims of abuse, or promoting peaceful communities. All of these project ideas can come from transition assessment data from career interest or CTE guidance regarding the career clusters. For students who are not on IEPs, service learning opportunities may be identified through their previous career exploration or job-sampling experiences, as well as an expressed interest in volunteering in a specific way in the school or community. As noted in Figure 1, service learning opportunities are typically high school experiences. Service learning hours and projects are often a component of graduation requirements in many high schools and can be offered as a way to demonstrate proficiency on Common Career Technical Core or CCSS content through means other than a written assessment.

As Ms. Hinson has learned more about these different components of WBLEs, she is encouraged that she actually can provide her ninth- and 10th-grade students with opportunities to develop important skills. She decides to reach out to (a) the Parent–Teacher Association representative for the upcoming spirit wear sale, (b) the booster club representative for the concession stand during winter events, and (c) the special education teacher who manages the coffee delivery business—to plan assignments for her students that will allow them to apply their written and oral language skills to develop flyers, write instructions and reports, and practice customer service. After communicating with those who currently do the job, she will be able to develop clear grading rubrics and will communicate these back with her partner general education ELA teacher.

The following are ways that teachers can implement service learning:

- Encourage student volunteering in community and social programs by offering assignment credit. For example, teacher cadet programs require volunteer hours in local schools to receive credit. Also, students interested in the medical field could create a local blood drive as an assignment for the class.
- Require formal volunteer service in a structured community service program. Examine the standards for math, ELA, science, social studies, health and physical education, visual arts, performing arts, and each career cluster addressed within a specific CTE course and identify four ways (one per academic quarter) that students could demonstrate proficiency through an unpaid work or service learning activity at school or in the community.
- Discuss student engagement with on-campus clubs, and match a student's potential interests as part of her or his transition services.
- Investigate the components of service learning and information about it, as developed by the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (see http://www servicelearning.org/ what-service-learning).

Internships

Internships are "formal agreements whereby a youth is assigned specific tasks in a workplace over a predetermined period of time. Internships may be paid or unpaid, depending on the nature of the agreement with the company and the nature of the tasks" (Luecking, 2009, p. 13). Internships are good ways to begin exploring career options and help students decide what postsecondary training may be required. As noted in Figure 1, internships are typically experiences arranged in a student's final year of high school. Teachers and their employer counterparts need a process or set of guidelines that students can follow to be able to participate in an internship. For example, an application process with specific criteria should be used. School systems can make formal agreements with corporations to create opportunities for students to explore a career of interest and begin networking with professionals in that field. The following are activities that teachers can implement to facilitate student access to internships:

- Investigate internship agreements by communicating with the school counselor and CTE teachers or coordinators.
- Develop or encourage student participation in a paid or unpaid student co-op (cooperative education is a structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience).
- Provide credit for formal time-limited work experience paired with a CTE course of instruction.
- Develop a formal arrangement with an employer to learn identified work skills.

Teachers will need to collaborate with administrators, school counselors, CTE departments in their school, and possibly other professionals in the

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school system's administration to successfully develop internships.

Ms. Hinson is temporarily stumped by what to do regarding internships and the next WBLE type–apprenticeships. She can investigate what exists and what might be developed and advocate for student participation in internships through the transition services, courses of study, and annual goals within a student's IEP. She can also explore the possibility of students earning academic credit for assignments relating to certain aspects of their internships.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are "formal, sanctioned work experiences of extended duration in which an apprentice learns specific occupational skills related to a standardized trade, such as carpentry, plumbing, or drafting. Many apprenticeships also include paid work components" (Luecking, 2009, p. 13). Traditionally, training programs were 1 year in length to be eligible for registration. Apprenticeships are also typically offered for students in their final year of high school. Recent federal rule changes allow programs to be competency based rather than time specific and recommend at least 144 hours of related instruction, which is usually classroom based (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Teachers can begin this process by looking at the criteria needed to establish an apprenticeship occupation. These include both on-the-job competencies and areas of knowledge that the student acquires during the training. Apprenticeships can also help guide transition planning as well as identify potential employers. Apprenticeship program information is readily available from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Apprenticeship web site. The following are ways that teachers can implement apprenticeship involvement:

- CTE teachers identify and use the most current guidance from U.S. Department of Labor and their school district on apprenticeship programs. The most current guidance on apprenticeships aligned with career clusters is available through the Association of Career and Technical Education.
- Learn about current apprenticeships by meeting with career technical educators.
- Learn about U.S. Department of Labor requirements for a registered apprenticeship (visit http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/training/apprenticeship.htm#lawsreg).

Paid Employment

As indicated in Figure 1, employment typically occurs in the later years of secondary school and could be part- or full-time jobs, including summer employment. Paid employment may include

> existing standard jobs in a company or customized work assignments that are negotiated with an employer, but these jobs always feature a wage paid directly to the youth. Such work may be scheduled during or after the school day. It may be integral to a course of study or simply a separate adjunctive experience. (Luecking, 2009, p. 13)

Ms. Hinson's students are ninth and 10th graders. She knows that some are working after school or on weekends. She decides that she is not going to try to arrange internships, apprenticeships, or paid employment experiences; however, she is going to communicate with her CTE colleagues to determine what internship and apprenticeship opportunities exist for students, and she will be more systematic about knowing what work experiences her students do have. She decides that she can reinforce their experiences through content-relevant reading materials.

The following are ways that teachers can implement activities to support paid employment:

- Monitor student access to and success in part- or full-time jobs through course assignments that encourage student reflection and documentation—for example, a rubric for self-monitoring of specific job tasks and skills. This information can provide transition assessment data for ongoing future planning.
- Encourage students to apply for jobs related to courses of study and postsecondary goals. For example, if students are interested in working in the hospitality field, encourage them to apply for part-time positions at restaurants and local hotels.
- Develop a way to ensure communication from students and families regarding student participation in adjunctive or unrelated experiences to school and course work, such as after-school,

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weekend, and summer jobs, so that this information can contribute to planning—for example, a student-created monthly newsletter.
- Explore tools on work and employment readiness provided by the U.S. Business Leadership Network (see http://www.usbln.org/index.html).

There are many opportunities for students in terms of internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment. Teacher can enhance these WBLEs by including instruction in interviewing, filling out applications, and self-reflection. For example, tone of voice and use of first/third person are academic skills that need to be transferred to employment settings. Teachers could hold mock interviews to practice tone of voice in an interview as well as in the workplace.

When planned simultaneously with course instruction, assessment of academic competence, and documentation of transition assessment information, these experiences can have great benefit.

Conclusion

Establishing WBLEs is a daunting task for any classroom teacher who is busy with instruction, assessment, discipline, and documentation. However, when planned simultaneously with course instruction, assessment of academic competence, and documentation of transition assessment information, these experiences can have great benefit. Using this timeline in partnership with the suggestions for implementing the various types of WBLEs, teachers will be able to identify WBLEs to prepare all students to be career and college ready.

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TEACHING Exceptional Children, *Vol. 47, No. 6, pp. 352–358.*

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