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*Improving Opportunities & Outcomes*

# Strategies to Improve Opportunities in Career and Technical Education for Students who Experience Disability

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# Purpose

The strategies outlined herein are intended to help state-level personnel improve collaboration among special education, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and career and technical education (CTE) for students who experience disability. Information in this guide is a result of qualitatively analyzed data from discussions with state agency personnel. NTACT:C staff purposefully sought states that demonstrated a (a) multi-year approach to intentional collaboration between these partners; (b) dedication to and history of using data to inform decisions; and (c) cross-discipline approach to serving students who experience disability within the states' strategic plans. State agency representatives from Delaware, Indiana, and Ohio participated in the discussions.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WE ASKED EACH STATE

- Do you currently have interagency agreements (IA) supporting transition that includes CTE?
- What effective strategies do you use that promote success in CTE for students who experience disability?
- What helps staff support access and success in CTE for students who experience disability?
- How do you create an effective learning environment that supports students who experience disability in CTE?
- When you think about data that inform system or program strengths and/or needs, what do you include?
- How do you implement data-driven decision-making to improve CTE programming for students who experience disability?

We identified three overarching and interconnected themes that support access and success in CTE for students who experience disability:

1. Infrastructure Supports — elements or resources of a system that are needed to do the work.
2. Staff Supports — resources or strategies that help staff.
3. Student Supports — resources or strategies that help students access and be successful in CTE.

Within each overarching theme, we identified sub-themes, and extracted specific strategies described by the state as supporting the themes and sub-themes.

## Themes and Sub-Themes

| Infrastructure Supports | Staff Supports | Student Supports |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Develop interagency agreements<br>2. Build systems to support success<br>3. Develop intentional and purposeful processes<br>4. Develop a culture of expectations | 1. Build staff awareness<br>2. Be responsive to needs<br>3. Foster district leadership | 1. Create a welcoming environment<br>2. Engage early and consistently<br>3. Communicate with students and families to build awareness |

# INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT STRATEGIES

1. Develop Interagency Agreements

   - Develop interagency agreements with simple language, avoid agency-specific jargon, and spell out acronyms.

   - Ensure the agreements describe how pertinent data will be shared across agencies and programs.

   - Plan for sustainability by defining and describing the roles and responsibilities in interagency agreements; plan for and expect personnel changes when developing agreements, and incorporate strategies into agreements that will sustain the work.

2. Build Systems to Support Success

   - Diversify teams and team members to problem solve and learn about and from each other.

   - Invite personnel who have access to (and can explain) agency and program data to attend interagency meetings.

   - Build staff capacity through cross-agency professional development.

3. Develop Intentional and Purposeful Processes

   - Use the same unique identifiers across agencies and programs to support data-driven decision making.

   - Develop and use data sharing agreements across agencies and programs.

   - Build staff's capacity to understand and navigate each agency's system (e.g., educators understand the VR system and vice versa).

   - Ensure staff understand their roles and responsibilities, as well as the roles and responsibilities of their collaborators.

4. Develop a Culture of Expectations
   - Have agency and program leadership deliver a common message of high expectations.
   - Encourage new ideas; view challenges as opportunities to learn and grow.
   - Share CTE opportunities with families, starting at an early age.
   - Create avenues for middle school students to explore and engage in conversations about CTE opportunities.
   - Put ongoing evaluation and improvement processes in place; showcase and celebrate successes.

## What we heard

States' approaches to interagency agreements vary; they are unique and individualized to the needs of the state.

> **"I think [interagency agreements are] important because relationships change and it's important to have those things in place... people come, and people go... having these higher-level agreements in place keep that work moving and... become part of the culture of the organizations."**

## STAFF SUPPORT STRATEGIES

1. Build Staff Awareness
   - Disaggregate and share special education, vocational rehabilitation, and career and technical education data with local practitioners and personnel.
   - Use cross-agency and cross-program professional development to teach staff about specific roles and responsibilities and the processes that support coordination of services and implementation of effective supports for students.

2. Be Responsive to Staff Needs
   - Identify staff needs by:
     - Holding focus groups, and
     - Developing a survey or data driven self-review tool.
   - Create a process to deliver cross-agency/program professional development and technical assistance in response to specific needs.
   - Develop resources that can be used statewide to address identified needs.

3. Foster District Leadership
   - Support regularly scheduled, internal and cross-agency/program meetings.
   - Provide professional development to CTE and special education teachers on effective instructional strategies to work with students who experience disability.
   - Value and foster a culture of inclusivity.

## What we heard

Staff are the direct access point to information that others need. Investing in their knowledge better supports the agency, other staff, students, and their families. Agencies should not expect staff to be experts on all things to all people. Instead, staff need awareness of:

- supports for students,
- opportunities to learn each other's systems, and
- services provided by other agencies.

Agency partners should know staff needs and be responsive to those needs. At the same time, local districts should take the lead in investing and advocating for their local personnel.

> **"We have brought together teams of individuals from the adult service agencies and from education ....to be able to have conversations to say, 'this is how we can make this work in your classroom, but you have to be willing to give us a chance...' it's providing that knowledge to individuals that students with disabilities can be just as successful if not more successful than those without disabilities if they're given the opportunity."**

## STUDENT SUPPORT STRATEGIES

1. Create a Welcoming Environment

   - Provide professional development opportunities for special educators and CTE teachers to learn about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and implementation of individual accommodations.

   - Communicate the expectation that students who experience disability should access and participate in Career and Technical Education.

   - Provide opportunities for students to observe, develop, and practice self-advocacy skills.

2. Engage Early and Consistently

   - Share information about CTE and VR services with students, starting at an early age.

   - Connect students to their school VR contact at an early age (e.g., age 14 or grade 8), who can help them obtain work-based learning experiences and other VR services that lead to their first job.

   - Engage students in conversations about employment and employment goals.

   - Before leaving high school, identify and provide job specific accommodations and services students will need in their employment.

3. Communicate with Students and Families to Build Awareness

   - Create resources that describe the agencies and help families navigate agency systems (e.g., 1-page description of agency services that educators can give families during an IEP meeting).

   - Create public relations materials that describe local CTE programs and student experiences.

   - Increase students' and families' awareness of CTE beginning at an early age.

## What we heard

To create a welcoming environment for students, it is critical that local practitioners:

- Use individualized accommodations to support students who experience disability.
- Embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in CTE programs.
- Implement "out of the box" thinking.

> **"It's not necessarily about specific supports. It's more about philosophy and perspective so you must create a welcoming environment first, and you have to make those adults, that may not have ever worked with individuals with disabilities before, feel comfortable now working with them and inviting them into their space."**

**Reference:** Alverson, C. Y., Unruh, D. K., Griffin, B., Hyatt, J., & Allison, R., (2023). Special Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Career and Technical Education: Improving Outcomes for Students Who Experience Disability. In J. R. DeSimone, and L. Roberts, (Eds.), *Cases on Leadership Dilemmas in Special Education*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.