

Project PEACE:

Promoting Employment
After high school through
Community Expertise

Colonial
Heights
Community
Landscape
Analysis, 1.0
2025



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Project PEACE: Promoting Employment After high school through Community Expertise Colonial Heights Landscape Analysis

Executive Summary

This landscape analysis was written as a part of a year-long process that included a series of 3 community conversations conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University's Project PEACE within the Colonial Heights Community.

Key Findings:

Colonial Heights demonstrates several strengths in supporting youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) towards employment. Notably:

- **Strong partnerships** exist between Colonial Heights High School and the Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), facilitating effective career planning and support.
- **Active school administration** involvement is exemplified through work-based learning opportunities like student-led enterprises (e.g. the student Coffee Cart delivery service).
- **Family involvement** is significant, supported by an active Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) and family liaisons, promoting strong collaboration between schools and families.

Several transition needs were identified, including limited accessible transportation, lack of work-skill development opportunities, and greater awareness among local employers about the benefits and processes of employing youth with disabilities.

Recommendations for Colonial Heights:

1. **Expand Work-Based Learning Opportunities:**
 - Develop additional student-led enterprises and internships.
 - Provide targeted training for special education teachers to support diverse work experiences.
2. **Employer Engagement and Education:**
 - Implement reverse job fairs or industry days to strengthen connections between employers and students.
 - Create employer awareness campaigns highlighting successful employment stories of youth with IDD, utilizing testimonials, videos, and other engaging media.
3. **Address Transportation Barriers:**
 - Clarify and enhance available transportation solutions through coordinated efforts among the school division, DARS, and local partners.
4. **Strengthen Family Collaboration:**

- Offer workshops and create family support networks to share strategies and resources for employment readiness.
- Encourage family participation in the DARS Pre-ETS navigator program.

5. **Community Collaborative Actions:**

- Establish a collaborative group responsible for planning regular events like reverse job fairs, industry days, and workshops aimed at increasing employer engagement and community-wide awareness.

By leveraging community strengths and strategically addressing key challenges, Colonial Heights can enhance employment outcomes for youth with IDD. Ongoing collaboration between schools, families, employers, and support organizations is crucial for success.

Introduction

Less than half of Virginians with disabilities are employed, highlighting a significant gap in employment rates between people with and without disabilities (VBPD, 2022). In 2020, the employment rate for individuals with cognitive disabilities in Virginia was approximately 45% lower than the employment rate for individuals without disabilities (Paul et al., 2021). Research suggests that employment initiatives for individuals with disabilities are most effective when they begin in childhood and continue through transition age and adulthood. To support this transition, students with disabilities between the ages of 14 and 22 receive specialized support services to enhance their success in independent living, education, training, and employment.

Project PEACE (Promoting Employment After High School through Community Expertise) is a multi-year initiative led by Virginia Commonwealth University's Partnership for People with Disabilities. Focused on Richmond and Colonial Heights, Virginia, this project seeks to improve employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Using various research methods—including photovoice, community conversations, virtual asset mapping, and data collection- Project PEACE develops and implements community-driven employment strategies.

Recognizing the value of local knowledge, cultural resources, and lived experiences within communities is essential for creating effective employment strategies for individuals with disabilities.

The **community landscape analysis** helps identify available resources and opportunities within a specific community, informing the development of individualized and targeted employment plans. This analysis examines employment-related assets, resources, and challenges

Colonial Heights, located approximately 23 miles south of Richmond, Virginia has a population of 18,393 residents.

The majority of the population identifies as White, comprising 72% of the community. Employment data indicates that 59.8% of people aged 16 and older are employed. The median household income in Colonial Heights is \$65,570

*data reported by the U.S. Census Bureau

for individuals with IDD in the Colonial Heights area, while also considering broader, state-level initiatives that impact employment opportunities for this population.

The first section will review state-level resources that support employment for individuals with IDD. Subsequently, we will focus on community-level resources specific to Colonial Heights. Finally, we will share findings from a series of community conversations held within the Colonial Heights community.

Employment Training and Support

Various agencies, organizations, and research centers have long played a pivotal role in improving employment opportunities for youth with IDD in Virginia. These entities provide essential services to youth before and after high school graduation. By outlining the scope of these services, we will identify existing service gaps and highlight areas for further development.

A range of employment training and support resources are available to youth in Colonial Heights. This section lists some of these resources and provides additional information about their supports and services. The list is not comprehensive, but the following agencies and organizations play a significant role in the transition and employment of people with IDD in Virginia.

WWRC

The Wilson Workforce Rehabilitation Center (WWRC), in partnership with the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), provides Pre-ETS to eligible students with disabilities. WWRC also offers two key programs—the Postsecondary Education Rehabilitation Program (PERT) and the Pre-Employment Readiness and Education Program (PREP)- which support students in transition from high school to employment (WWRC, n.d.). Students can opt for a comprehensive vocational evaluation through WWRC during or after high school.

Project SEARCH

Project SEARCH is a formal program designed to raise national employment rates for youth with IDD (Christensen et al., 2015). Created in 1996 at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, Project SEARCH’s Transition-to-Work program recruits youth across the nation to provide hands-on internship experience during high school. This business-led program fosters partnerships between employers, educators, state and federal employment services, and other stakeholders. Youth enrolled in Project SEARCH are offered job skills training, job coaching, and formative feedback from employers and educators (Project SEARCH, 2018).

In Virginia, approximately 20 Project SEARCH sites exist, with three in the greater Richmond Metro region. In Colonial Heights, Project SEARCH operates at Fort Greg-Adams where it has been running for three years. The Colonial Heights school division contributes teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff to the site, while Virginia Commonwealth University’s

Rehabilitation Research and Training Center provides job coaching. For the 2024-2025 academic year, eight Colonial Heights High School students are participating in Project SEARCH at Fort Greg Adams.

VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC)

Over the past 40 years, the VCU RRTC has become a national leader in employment research, advancing knowledge and developing practices to help people with disabilities access meaningful employment in their communities. The VCU RRTC oversees numerous research and service-oriented projects. This community landscape analysis primarily focuses on services, resources, and technical assistance within the RRTC's scope.

Center on Transition Innovations (CTI)

The Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) at Virginia Commonwealth University is an organization dedicated to providing evidence-based resources to transition-aged youth with IDD, their families, educators, and other stakeholders (CTI, 2020). Their training and technical assistance for school divisions are funded through the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). CTI provides free resources for community members on transition topics, resources, and practices to increase competitive integrated employment for youth with IDD (CTI, 2022).

Get Ready for Your Career: A Self-Paced Online Course

Get Ready for Your Career is a flexible, self-paced online course developed and implemented by CTI. This course allows students to engage with course modules independently or with support. Teachers, family members, or others could also access the course and customize materials to best support individual students based on their support needs. Completing the course helps students plan the steps essential to being well-prepared for employment.

ACE-IT in College

ACE-IT (Accessing College Experiences-Individualized Techniques) in College is an inclusive postsecondary education program at Virginia Commonwealth University for students with IDD who do not have a standard high school diploma. As a comprehensive transition program, students have opportunities to receive federal financial assistance, such as Pell Grants, and participate in federal work-study programs. ACE-IT supports students in participating in inclusive higher education courses and provides job support that facilitates paid campus and community internships. Over 90% of program graduates acquire and sustain paid employment. In the 2024-25 academic year, Colonial Heights High School students with disabilities participated in an ACE-IT in College on-campus tour and information gathering session.

Business Connections

Business Connections, a supported employment provider anchored in the VCU RRTC, provides supported employment services for people with severe disabilities, including IDD. Their staff supports DARS-eligible people to find employment, train for positions, build skills, and find long-term success on the job. Business Connections also leads person-centered employment planning and pre-ETS services for youth with disabilities. Employers provide a range of services, including support for businesses to reap the full benefits of employing people with disabilities while also maintaining an accessible, competitive workplace. Business Connections supports Colonial Heights students in their Project SEARCH participation at Fort Greg Adams.

Resources for Independent Living

Resources for Independent Living (RIL) serves the Greater Richmond Area, including a satellite location in Petersburg, Virginia, that covers Colonial Heights. RIL falls under the category of Centers for Independent Living (CIL), which are defined as “non-residential places of action and coalition where people with disabilities develop skills and increase empowerment so that they can live independently in their community” (VA SILC, n.d.). CILs are non-profit organizations funded by federal, state, and local governments, primarily through VR services (DARS). Virginia currently has seventeen CILs (VA SILC, n.d.). The Crater Region, which includes Colonial Heights, Petersburg, Hopewell, and Dinwiddie, Virginia, does not currently have a CIL, making the RIL one of the largest catchment areas in Virginia.

SOAR365

SOAR365 is a Virginia-based non-profit organization offering a wide range of programs for people with disabilities, including its Employment Services program, which helps businesses hire individuals with disabilities. Employment Services provides a variety of services to federal, state, and local employers, including administrative support, assembly and logistics, janitorial and custodial services, and landscaping and grounds maintenance (SOAR365, n.d.). Through this program, SOAR365 not only provides employment opportunities for people with disabilities but also helps them achieve independence, earn fair wages, and access benefits. Employment Services has recently expanded to include employment support personnel in the Crater Region to serve Colonial Heights, Petersburg, and Dinwiddie.

Community Conversations

In 2024, we facilitated three 90-minute community conversations at Colonial Heights High School to learn about the lived experiences of community stakeholders, including youth, families, educators, businesses, and community leaders. Community conversations are structured dialogues aimed at generating and prioritizing local solutions that resonate with community

culture, values, priorities, and available resources (Carter & Bumble, 2018). This research was approved by the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Institutional Review Board (IRB), thereby adhering to ethical standards for studies involving human participants.

Community Conversations were planned and facilitated by a collaborative, community-based team comprised of two Project PEACE staff, a special education teacher from Colonial Heights, a family liaison specialist, and an administrator from the Colonial Heights Public Schools' Special Education Department. Additionally, logistical support, such as registration, refreshments, and stipend payments, was provided by The Partnership for People with Disabilities at VCU. The planning team disseminated flyers to local businesses, families, individuals with disabilities, and service providers.

All three community conversations adhered to a consistent format. Each session started by highlighting the lived experiences of people with IDD. This emphasized the population conversations focused on, amplified the voices of people with disabilities, and set a tone for the meeting: that employment and postsecondary education are realistic outcomes for people with greater support needs. Next, participants were divided into breakout groups and assigned specific questions to address. These breakout sessions lasted approximately 20 minutes each and were facilitated by a trained table host, whose role was to promote solution-focused dialogue, equitable opportunities for participation, and data collection. After breakout group discussions, a whole-group “harvest” was held to share ideas that emerged within discrete breakout groups. All sessions were recorded. Participants' names were substituted with pseudonyms to safeguard their confidentiality, and the recorded sessions were subsequently transcribed for qualitative analysis.

While all conversations followed this same basic format, the small group discussion questions differed slightly. During the first Community Conversation, participants answered the questions:

1. What can we do as a community to increase employment opportunities for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities?
2. How can our community work together to make these ideas happen in Colonial Heights?

For the second Community Conversations event, participants responded to the questions:

1. Can you all share the names of Colonial Heights area employers who hire employees with IDD?
2. What would it take for the broader Colonial Heights community to know and care about IDD employment successes?
3. What does Colonial Heights School need to ensure that all students (with the greatest support needs) participate in paid community employment while in high school?
4. What could we do to help?

Finally, we used a slightly different session format in the third Community Conversations event. First, participants engaged in a “visioning” activity, where they were asked to envision what a successful transition and employment would look like in their community. Then,

participants co-created “hopeful” news headlines about a future newsworthy event or milestone they would like to see related to employment outcomes for youth with IDD. Next, small groups worked together to create a vision statement by taking their hopeful headlines and stating what their community goals were, whom these goals served, and what the goals would ultimately achieve. Finally, we asked all participants to share whose voices were missing in the planning process and possible strategies to bring these individuals into the conversation.

Analysis

Guided by Bumble and colleagues’ (2019) analytical method, we used a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze all three community conversation discussions. The preliminary analysis team consisted of three doctoral students and one undergraduate student, all guided by a professor with expertise in transition, special education and qualitative research. After transcribing community conversation transcripts, the team employed an inductive coding methodology. More specifically, coders independently used inductive, open coding to group broad concepts such as transition needs, community strengths, and transition action steps. Following this preliminary analysis, one researcher not involved in the first round of coding conducted a secondary analysis of the transcripts by building on the original code groups. To do so, the researcher used the following questions to guide the secondary coding process:

1. How do transition needs and community strengths inform transition action steps?
2. Who are the actors involved in each transition action step?
3. How do these actors collaborate and support one another to engage in transition action steps?

Results

Community members in Colonial Heights reported a variety of opportunities and strategies to increase the employment of youth with IDD. Table 1 provides a list of strategies that may be used to increase the employment of persons with IDD, as informed by community stakeholders. To further understand how the community may enact these strategies, this results section describes 1) how the transition needs and community strengths align with these action steps, 2) the primary actors involved in carrying out these action steps, and 3) how these actors may support or collaborate to be successful.

Table 1*Strategies to Increase Employment Opportunities for Individuals with IDD*

General Strategy	Action Steps	Description
1. Address Transportation Barriers	Accessible Transportation	Advocate for accessible and affordable transportation options, such as specialized shuttles or rideshare programs tailored for individuals with IDD.
	Local Transportation Solutions	Partner with local businesses and community organizations to create transportation initiatives, such as carpool networks or employer-provided transportation.
	Proximity Hiring	Encourage local employers to hire within walking distance or areas easily accessible by public transport.
2. Change Assumptions About Abilities	Awareness Campaigns	Launch public awareness campaigns to showcase the capabilities of youth with IDD and the success stories of those in the workforce.
	Employer Training	Provide training to employers on the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities and how to create inclusive workplaces.
3. Engage Employers and Businesses	Employer Roundtables	Facilitate regular meetings with local businesses to discuss hiring practices and address misconceptions.
	Job Carving and Customization	Promote job carving, or tailoring roles to align with the strengths and interests of individuals with IDD.
	Incentivize Employers	Educate businesses about tax credits and other financial incentives available for hiring individuals with disabilities.
	Educate Employers	Dispel myths about higher workers' compensation costs by providing factual information on workplace accommodations and risk. Highlight studies that show employees with disabilities often have equal or lower workers' compensation claims compared to other employees.
4. Collaborate with DARS (Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services)	Facilitate Connections	Establish programs to connect students with DARS counselors early to help with career planning and internships.
	DARS Presentations	Include DARS representatives in community meetings and provide information sessions for families and students.

5. Involve Families in Transition Processes	Expand Services	Work with DARS to provide job coaches and mentors to support youth transitioning into employment.
	Family Workshops	Offer workshops to educate families about employment possibilities, services, and resources available for their children.
	Support Networks	Create parent and caregiver support groups to share strategies and resources for employment readiness.

Strengths

Just as impactful as defining barriers to employment or transition needs, Colonial Heights identified several strengths of their community that support students in finding competitive, paid employment. **Participants of community conversations described strengths including student work ethic, having a close, tight-knit community, having experienced school and transition professionals, and having families with existing connections to local businesses.**

Strengths directly informed transition action plans; for example, living in a small community posed some challenges, such as limited access to transportation. However, community members leveraged the strength of a small community to suggest a plan that schools and families partner to provide transportation for students.

During these conversations, it also became clear that families had incredible knowledge and connections in their community, which led to the suggestion that families share their experiences through regular meetings, shared resources, and other community events. Participants recognized that families needed to leverage their connections to businesses, support providers, and other networks, but had no structured outlet for sharing their knowledge. The Project PEACE Community Collaborative for Employment Transition (CCET) may be one way for families to continue engaging with and support each other.

Action Steps

Transition needs were also directly related to action steps. Community stakeholders were aware of their community's specific needs and how to translate those needs into concrete actions that lead to paid employment. Notably, participants of these conversations emphasized the need for improved transportation, increased work skill development, matching students with jobs that meet their needs and preferences, and educating businesses about working with youth with disabilities.

Regarding transportation, participants referred back to the community strength of engaged families and educators to suggest that parents and/or the school work together to provide transportation to students traveling to internships, work-based learning trips, or their paid jobs. Participants noted that because of the small size of their city, public transportation was not accessible to everyone and therefore, they could rely on dedicated school professionals and family members.

Next, to increase work skill development and help with job matching, participants suggested that schools engage in additional work-based learning and student-led enterprise. Doing so will help students explore additional careers so that educators get to know student preferences and needs and can work to match students with a job that suits them. Families also discussed how their child's internship and work-based learning experiences improved soft skills such as confidence and social skills, and improved more concrete employment skills such as learning to handle money.

Finally, community conversation participants shared great ideas for educating businesses through business mentorship models where businesses that successfully work with students with disabilities share their knowledge with other businesses. They also suggested that schools invite businesses to the classroom and professional development sessions to learn more about incentives and processes of employing people with disabilities.

Primary Actors

Not only is it important to have an action plan, but it is critical to know who will carry out each step of that plan. In other words, who are the actors that will support the transition in Colonial Heights? Interestingly, the two actors that participants mentioned most frequently and that would have the biggest roles in the community transition plan were schools and businesses.

Schools are often the actors with the most direct access to students, so it makes sense that schools would be tasked with many transition responsibilities. Participants described the need for schools to provide additional work-based learning opportunities through educational visits to local businesses and student-led enterprise and internships for students. Relatedly, students need more career exploration opportunities in school, which would address another transition need to match students to jobs that meet their needs and preferences. Lastly, participants were excited about schools hosting a career fair or reverse career fair, where businesses can meet students and learn about their skills and experiences. Participants mentioned another idea of an industry day where students not only learn about postsecondary education opportunities but also potential industries that they can explore.

Businesses were tasked with increased engagement in school and community events, including community conversations. Families mentioned how they would appreciate it if businesses that work with youth with disabilities would share their experiences and knowledge with other businesses. Mentorship between businesses could address the transition needs of educating employers about the benefits of working with youth with disabilities and the financial and legal logistics of doing so.

Families, youth, community agencies, and the Partnership for People with Disabilities were also assigned roles in supporting transition, yet their roles primarily consisted of supporting schools and businesses through funding, education, collaboration, and general engagement. Given the Partnership's funding and research resources, community members asked that they financially support professional development for educators and potentially employers related to transition. Additionally, the Partnership may create and share educational resources with families, schools, and employers and share success stories through video and infographics.

DARS also plays a big role in transition, and community members asked that schools partner with DARS more frequently to bring information directly to families and provide job coaching services. Finally, participants in community conversations wanted to hear more from youth about their needs and experiences. Several youth with disabilities attended these conversations, and other participants appreciated their perspectives regarding career interests, school experiences, and workplace needs.

Community Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned findings from Community Conversations, we make the following recommendations to increase employment for persons with Disabilities in Colonial Heights. It is important to note that the community had strong plans for action that will require ongoing and potentially aggressive planning (i.e., improving transportation and improving community attitudes); however, there are concrete areas that can be immediately addressed to yield short-term and medium-term employment outcomes.

1. Teachers in Colonial Heights are motivated to build more work-based learning opportunities for their students. Project PEACE supported student-led enterprise training, and school staff were able to support students in building a snack cart business, allowing students to practice a range of 21st-century skills for employment. Teachers have also attended the Virginia and national DCDT conferences to learn about innovative approaches to support transition to employment. **The next step would be for the SPED team to identify training and support needed to support a range of high-quality work-based learning experiences for students with IDD.**
2. People with IDD are great employees, but not all employers know that. **We recommend sharing positive narratives about employees with disabilities in Colonial Heights.** These may take the form of brief testimonials, videos, and other media. They can be shared at the Chamber of Commerce and with other organizations with a wide reach and influence in the business community.
3. In community conversations, community members with diverse perspectives shared enthusiasm for reverse job fairs or “industry days” at the high school as an opportunity to open dialogue between students and employers. **We recommend that the Community Collaborative for Employment Transition create a plan for building and implementing such an opportunity and determine if they would like such an event to be held every year or two.**

Conclusion

This landscape analysis is only the first step in increasing employment opportunities for youth with IDD. The results will be shared with the Colonial Heights community collaborative. We

will support the CCET to develop a plan for employment transition, that will be subsequently reviewed, modified as needed, and approved by Colonial Heights high school. Implementing the plan will mark some of the early steps towards achieving the ambitious goals, set by the community, to prepare students with IDD for employed futures.

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