

Project PEACE:

Promoting Employment
After high school through
Community Expertise

Plan for
Community
Employment
Transition
2023



Project PEACE

Plan for Community Employment

Introduction

In Virginia there are multiple concurrent efforts to improve employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). These are led by agencies (e.g. Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services, DARS), research centers (e.g., the VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center), providers (e.g., SOAR 365), organizations (e.g., Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, PEATC), and legislative committees (e.g., the Virginia Commission on Youth). This Community-based Plan for Employment outlines an approach to improve employment for youth with IDD that is informed by community partners and stakeholders in Richmond, Virginia, including the perspectives of traditionally marginalized and racialized groups, including youth with IDD that identify as persons of color. Further, a community landscape analysis (CLA) and ongoing meetings with community stakeholders informed the approach outlined herewithin.

Project PEACE (Promoting Employment After High School through Community Expertise) recognizes that all communities are distinct in their values, cultures, resources, partnerships and barriers. This Community-based Plan for Employment is unique to our Richmond community and any attempts to replicate this plan in other communities should be done so with caution because all communities are unique. Any plan for youth employment, in any community, should be developed with involvement of that community. This plan outlines steps that have been and will be taken to assure that employment outcomes for Richmond's youth with IDD continue to improve in the years to come.

Community Engagement

Citizens of any given community can offer collaborative insights about the assets, resources, relationships and cultures that make where they live special. They can point out pockets of opportunity as well as opportunity deserts. Many, however, have limited awareness

about the daily lives of people with IDD, including two very important facts: people with IDD want work and they can become reliable, dedicated and impactful employees.

Participant's in Richmond's community conversations described a need for consistent publicity and advocacy to reduce implicit and outright bias against prospective employees with IDD. Although our proposed plan addresses ableism, internalized and systematic, we largely address concrete factors which can be directly confronted.

If a community must be, at minimum, passively involved in improving employment outcomes for people with IDD, their active engagement can be addressed head-on. Our plan requires the engagement of peers with disabilities, parents and families, businesses and crucial agencies, organizations, providers, and advocates.

Peer Leadership. Examples of positive employment and postsecondary education outcomes are necessary within the employment ecology. First, our model requires that those who have attended participating schools and have acquired paid employment share their experiences with others. Sharing lived experience is valuable. It reifies belief that employment is possible for everyone. Youth in the K-12 environment need real examples of success from those that look like them and have lived experiences with disability. Project PEACE stays connected with a cadre of self-advocates that have developed presentations, videos, and resources to build awareness of the possibilities for employment as well as tips for preparing for and accessing community employment.

These voices are also crucial in educating parents, teachers, businesses, and others. Project PEACE has supported those with lived experiences to amplify their stories across multiple sectors of our community. Specifically, the project collaborates closely with a local inclusive postsecondary education program, the VCU ACE-IT in College program, to support transition age youth to tell their stories about participation in college, internships, and community employment to middle and high school students, their families, and interested school personnel.

Youth that participate in local Centers for Independent Living have also been instrumental in sharing advice and stories to promote success for those younger than them who have an IDD.

Parents. Undeniably, parents of children with IDD have important stories to share as well as a variety of distinct needs. They also have busy schedules and are vulnerable to both burnout and information overload. Project PEACE collaborates with the VCU Center for Family Involvement to assure parent voices are always embedded in decision making.

Parents, like youth, often find value in learning directly from the wisdom and lived experiences of other parents. The Project has developed videos in which parents share tips about what worked for them and their children during transition to employment. We also made sure to include parent voices when we train school professionals. Building understanding, compassion, and a sense of camaraderie with families is necessary for teachers, case managers, providers and others who have key roles in preparing, placing and supporting youth with IDD in Community jobs.

Parents also need access to resources and collaboration based on their needs and readiness. A key feature of preparing for employment outcomes is preparing parents. SOAR 365 and DARS provide opportunities for parents to participate in benefits counseling, understanding eligibility for employment services and the impact of employment on future services. We are currently translating a document that guides parents through transition and record exchange processes. This document, currently 30 pages of text, is being reinvisioned by two parents of children with IDD who are cultural navigators to the Black and LatinX communities. New informational documents will be accessible and approachable, giving clear instruction about necessary steps parents need to take to help their children access a variety of services and how to use records from K-12 and to add context to their child's preferences, choices, and plans that they have for their lives.

Businesses. As part of the CLA, businesses completed an assessment of needs and barriers that they experience when participating in internships or employment for youth with IDD. The

biggest barrier was that businesses did not know how to form relationships with schools or how to recruit people with disabilities. Results suggested an openness to diverse hires because, at the end of the day, employers want their businesses to succeed and are willing to be innovative to meet that end.

Training businesses then is important for improving employment opportunities for people with IDD. A few approaches that we have taken are to collaborate with business networks to share information and messaging around recruiting, hiring and retaining people with disabilities. This approach works best for businesses that are ready to employ workers, but it is not best for those who are not ready. Therefore, there needs to be multiple training alternatives.

One training opportunity that we are promoting as part of our plan is a business roundtable hosted by SOAR 365's Business Solutions. We know that peer leadership is important for youth with IDD and for parents, but it is also important for businesses. A roundtable approach emphasizes lateral learning, in which employers with experience facilitating internships or hiring people with disabilities can share those experiences, the challenges and opportunities alike.

For employers with very little known experience with disability we have partnered with Visitable, LLC to train businesses in accessibility and disability etiquette. As part of the partnership Visitable has added to the training specific discussions, training, and examples around customers and employees with IDD. Meeting with businesses of varying degrees of readiness and better preparing them to employ people with IDD is necessary for advancing employment outcomes for people with IDD.

Collaboration. Interagency collaboration is a strong predictor of positive transition outcomes. Our plan relies on building and maintaining relationships with DARS and DBHDS (Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services), including their community service boards, in support of efforts to further advance employment outcomes for youth with IDD. While we include agency partners in our community collaborative for employment transition, we also directly seek

their involvement in teacher training. Teachers want to know how to better connect with adult service agencies and how to use IEPs and transition assessments to advance individualized services for their students during and after high school. They also want to know how to guide parent connections and collaboration with agencies.

However, agency involvement alone is not adequate. For youth, families, and teachers it is paramount that they are aware of a variety of community organizations, providers, and resources available to assist with skill-building, employment training, and opportunities to prepare for or connect to employment. In Richmond these groups include, but are not limited to the Arc, the Center for Independent Living, the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, the Autism Society of Central Virginia, the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Richmond, the VCU Rehabilitation, Research and Training Center (RRTC), SOAR 365 and many, many more. Enhancing opportunities for collaboration and benefitting from community resources is necessary for improving employment outcomes for youth in our community and across America.

Teacher Preparation

Project PEACE has worked closely with professionals in a local school division, including classroom teachers, mentor teachers, intensive support coordinators, and the division's director of special education. They have each had important roles in planning, collaborating, and implementing key features of a community-based plan for employment transition. To support our educators we collaborated with the VCU Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) and SOAR 365 to lead three distinct sets of training.

Employment Discovery and Supported Employment. In year one, Project PEACE invited transition coordinators, mentor teachers, coordinators and others to a one-day training. The training provided explicit strategies for implementing key elements of employment discovery. This included ways for youth to build 21st century work skills in the home, school and the community based entirely around student interests, preferences, and support needs. Teachers learned how to expose youth to person-centered career clusters. Discovery was described as

an active process in which youth should have hands-on opportunities that include chores at home, jobs at school, volunteerism, job shadowing, informational interviews, and environmental assessments at targeted employment locations.

A supported employment crash course exposed to teachers to strategies to prepare for and enact best practices of supported and customized employment. This included ways to assess skills on job sites to determine what areas required support. Describing how and under what circumstances to provide support and how to fade support were important for teachers to learn how to help students improve their independence in work-related tasks.

Transition Academy. If the employment discovery and supported employment training was more universally available, the Transition Academy was for a selected audience. We invited all intensive supports teachers k-12 to the three-day Academy. These are teachers who lead classes for students with IDD and some of the greatest support needs for accessing curricula.

Too often teachers have a significant amount of burden and responsibility placed on them for helping students and their families prepare for employment after high school. We also know that transition outcomes improve when teachers successfully collaborate with families and community partners. Therefore, while the Transition Academy provided basic strategies for transition assessment, student-centeredness, and employment preparation, the primary aim was to help teachers identify and know how to work with key agencies and community partners. Representatives from DARS and DBHDS explained what they do and provided explicit instruction on how to contact and collaborate with their field agents to best support youth and their families. A family panel also provided guidance for teachers to build strong and lasting relationships with family members. All resources were made available for teachers to use, planning time was provided, and they were offered follow-along technical assistance to build on plans they developed to support their students throughout the year.

Work-Based Learning. For any project that supports short-term and long-term employment outcomes, attention to sustainability is important. Knowing that, we worked with leaders from a local school division to develop a train-the-trainer model that could perpetually contribute to lasting development of work-based learning strategies. This model included five 120 minute training sessions covering strategies and best practice for work-based learning. The goal was to supplement, if not replace, a focus on community-based instruction with work-based learning. Students were going into the community which is important, but there was no explicit instruction for employment. This training changed that approach. Each session was followed with a challenge to implement elements of the training into a classroom environment and to describe what worked and what did not in personal reflection and through a shared learning community. Learning, implementing and reflecting can be an ongoing process for educators in the targeted school division.

Trainings help prepare educators to best support students by improving knowledge of best practices for promoting employment opportunities, assessing, and helping youth better understand and build off of their personalized interests for employment.

Steps in the plan for employment transition

Up to this point we have described elements which occur prior to and simultaneously with the steps in our plan for employment transition. Community engagement and educator training need to be ongoing, informing and informed by students' movement through phases of preparation for employment transition. Our plan includes six-steps that lead up to participation in paid work-based learning experiences for high school students with IDD.

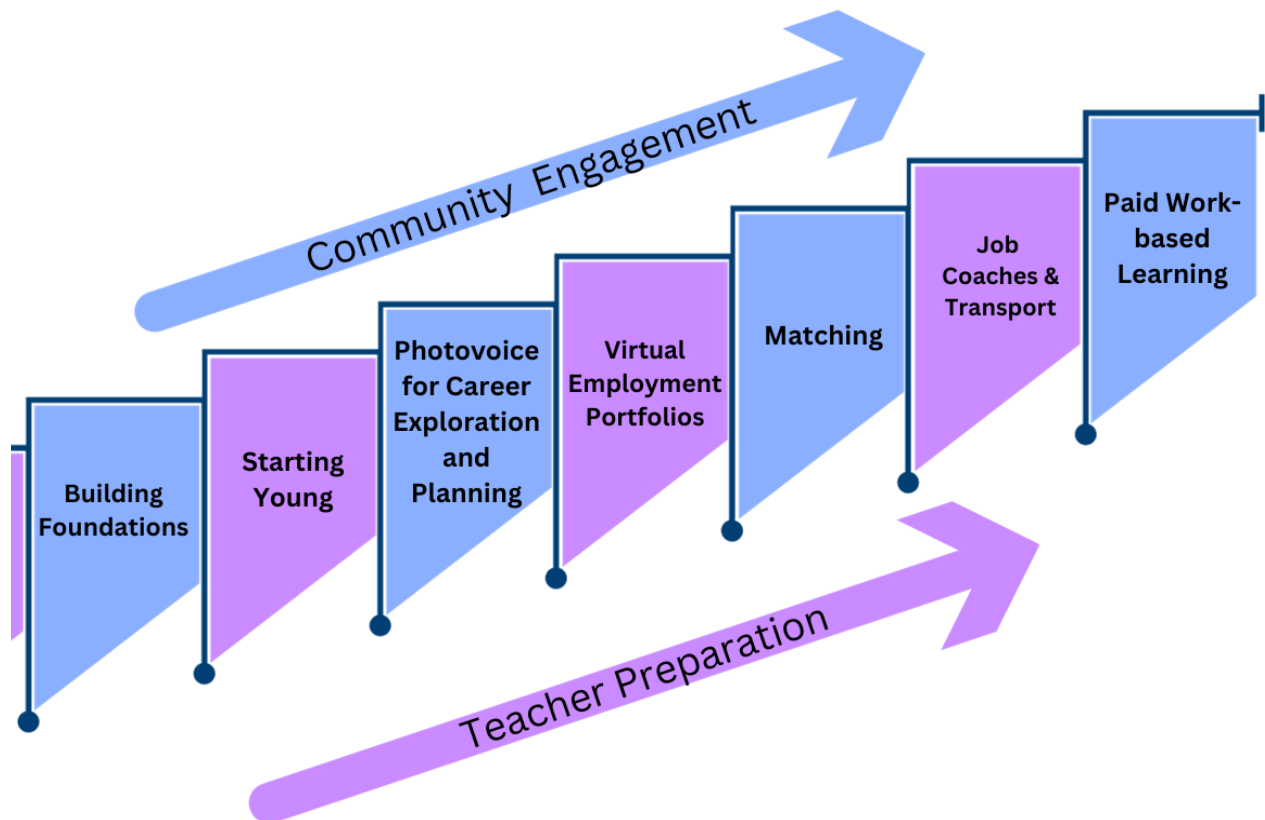
Building foundations

As we have partnered with schools in Virginia, our community partners steadily remind us to slow down, seek buy-in and permission, and develop a sequential process for accomplishing goals. This is good advice for all community-university partnerships. In that vein, a crucial first step for any plan is to collaborate with partners that are ready to undertake new

initiatives. Support from special education directors, school administration, and classroom teachers is necessary. Classroom teachers must know that they will have collaborative support and technical assistance needed to work with students through each step leading to paid work-based learning in the community.

Furthermore, champions must also come from the community. Many steps depend on collaborating with community businesses. Therefore, building relationships with businesses, explaining the goals of work-based learning, and creating a mutually beneficial relationship will increase the likelihood of developing subsequent steps. We recommend developing strong connections, at first, with three to five community businesses or organizations that cover a diverse range of work environments and skills.

Figure 1. *Stages of the Project PEACE Plan for Employment Transition*



Starting young

It is necessary but not sufficient to only train high school teachers on strategies for work-based learning and career exploration, development and planning for students with disabilities. Most elementary school students begin to explore various careers or even have classroom jobs. A key step in preparing youth with IDD for paid community work-based learning when in high school is for them to have opportunities to develop 21st century work skills and career interests when they are younger.

One approach that we are pursuing through Project PEACE is student-led enterprises. Like school-based enterprises, these approaches provide career development opportunities through the development and implementation of a business within a school. The key difference between the models is that student-led enterprises amplifies the degree to which students exercise choice, creativity, self-determination and teamwork to collectively choose, with teacher support, a model for exchanging goods or services for money. This model is appropriate for all ages because students can rotate between various job tasks whether it be production, marketing, sales, exchanging money, or customer service. Because it is ideal for youth to participate in work-based learning in the community when they are in high school, we are recommending that student-led enterprises be an antecedent to community-based employment activities that occur later in high school. Ideally, we support programs in elementary or middle schools.

Photovoice

Initially recommended for community landscape analysis alone, photovoice has become a key feature of Project PEACE that supports career exploration and planning. Photovoice is a flexible research method in which the perspectives of traditionally marginalized populations are centered. Participants use cameras to document their lived experiences, and then they use pictures to help them describe salient assets, barriers, and phenomena that impact their lives

and well-being. For people with IDD, photovoice can concretize emotions, assist with communication, and help with memory and recall.

Project PEACE uses aspects of the photovoice process to empower students to explore and communicate their employment aspirations, preferences, and support needs. This process only works in concert with work-based learning that occurs in the community. Schools build relationships with businesses, and students access transportation to visit the businesses and perform some job tasks, taking pictures of activities that capture key features of their career directions.

Youth pictures serve as an elicitation device. Students select key photographs to discuss different aspects of employment in groups with their peers. For example, students may take a picture of a desk to help them describe that they prefer a job that is primarily indoors and could be accomplished at a desk. For youth, the work-based learning experiences help them determine what sorts of work environments are best for them, be they indoors, outdoors, collaborative, independent, physically engaging, dirty, clean, quiet or noisy.

Work-based learning gives youth the experiences needed to make informed decisions about the extent to which they wish to pursue various lines of work. It may also serve to help youth eliminate some career options while others connect with jobs they would have never considered. By taking pictures of these elements that elicit strong responses, youth document thoughts that occur within specific places and moments. A photograph helps youth recall a thought, idea or emotion that may have otherwise been fleeting.

After participating in work-based learning and taking pictures, youth are given opportunities to reflect on their experiences by sharing their pictures. They can do this with a teacher or with small groups. We prefer the latter because youth are given opportunities to learn about elements of a job that appeal to others that they had not considered. They also gain opportunities to learn about common barriers to accessing such work or common support

needs, assuring students that they are not the only ones who could use assistance in learning and performing job duties.

Teachers are encouraged to work with their students to curate an installation of their photographs and their quoted thoughts. When youth have gallery openings they can invite family, employers, administrators, and other individuals that may have key roles in supporting their employment outcomes. By communicating their experiences, preferences, and support needs to others they are able to further develop interpersonal communication and self-determination.

The process is interactive, however, between youth and audiences. Together they can plan, share ideas, opportunities, and build awareness. We have found that audiences generally are surprised by the diversity of interests that students have and their resistance to being shepherded to a limited set of employment opportunities. Communication between youth and audiences can be facilitated in ways in which youth have a record of what was said. For example, we have response sheets next to all photographs where the community can add celebratory comments as well as tips, suggestions, or opportunities for the youth to build off of their interests.

Virtual Employment Portfolios

Our community was very supportive of using photovoice for career planning and for bringing the community together to learn about student career aspirations and barriers so that they could become more aware and act to improve employment outcomes. However, there was a concern that once a 5-6 week photovoice process was completed its impact would fade. They wanted a way for youth to use their pictures and stories to have a more lasting impact.

The suggestion was that youth create employment portfolios, tracking their employment journey. To assure that portfolios could be widely accessed we wanted to develop a virtual, living portfolio, one that could grow and change with students. We settled on youth developing virtual employment portfolios by building their own websites. Websites, incorporating youth photos,

videos and other communicative artifacts, can be shared with employers through the inclusion of web addresses in resumes and other application materials.

Each website, at minimum, contains three core content areas: 1) student self-descriptions (e.g., who am I?); 2) employment-based education experiences; 3) previous employment experiences, including volunteerism, chores, school-based job training, and work-based learning, including job-shadowing, internships, and other opportunities. Employment portfolios communicate key contextual information about youth, providing a more holistic employment narrative than what could be captured in a resume alone. For youth, reviewing their website is a way to refresh their memories about their experiences to help them communicate their employment experiences during interviews and networking events.

Matching

Matching youth with employers requires the completion of previous steps. First, in our experience, it is helpful to train teachers and provide them with resources on how to make business connections and how to match students to businesses based on employer needs and student preferences, skills and personal characteristics. A job analysis is a necessary step in matching. It requires really getting to know the business, required tasks, work environments, availability of natural supports, and receptivity and readiness for working with schools.

When thinking about a match we also need student data. Work-based learning experiences and other opportunities in school to perform job tasks can provide teachers with information about youth support needs and what approaches can accommodate the youth in completing tasks as independently as possible. Negotiation with business partners may be necessary to customize employment roles and tasks to make a better match between youth and employers. Matching is assessment, negotiation, collaboration, and agreement. For the purposes of Project PEACE matching would occur to help youth access paid internships in the community.

Preparing for sustainability: Job Coaches & Transportation

At the moment, as we document our plan for preparing youth and those who support them for paid internships, and ultimately paid jobs, there are two key considerations that remain barriers but ones with a multitude of potential solutions. These key features, ones that our Community Collaborative for Employment Transition (CCET) has yet to fully resolve are access to trained employment support specialists (i.e., job coaches) and transportation. Developing solutions for each of these is necessary for matching youth with fitting opportunities rather than just placing them in convenient opportunities.

To access employment support a temporary solution is for Project PEACE to pay for professional job supports at an out-of-pocket rate which typically ranges from \$70-\$100 per hour. The project has a budget line to pay for job coaches, but the amounts will only allow for a limited number of students to participate in paid-internships for a limited amount of time. Ideally, based on agreements with employers, internships may last for as many as 100 hours.

Another possible solution is for employment support specialists to train teachers and paraprofessionals to serve as job coaches. Because we are currently supporting youth with IDD and the greatest support needs there is a good likelihood that support 100% of the time might be necessary, at least in the beginning of the internship. This offers a sustainable approach because year after year trained school personnel could serve as job coaches for a limited number of students. Nonetheless, partnering school divisions have expressed concern for this approach due to staffing challenges and the ability to simultaneously support youth on job sites and in classrooms.

Finally, we are partnering with the DARS' EPIC (**E**ducation and outreach, **P**artnership development, provisions of Individualized services and **C**apacity building) project and their policy and technical assistance team from George Washington University. The project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration, has the specific aim of decreasing the use of subminimum wages and to increase access to competitive integrated employment. They support people with IDD transitioning from sheltered workshops

but also look to prevent sheltered workshops or unpaid community activities becoming the primary outcome for youth with IDD.

Project PEACE and EPIC look to collaborate to support youth at risk of entering subminimum wage employment. The EPIC team will build capacity with DARS counselors, helping them understand the ways the Project PEACE has supported RPS youth in many targeted goals of Pre Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). They will help us work with school staff, families and youth to complete referral processes necessary for youth to access transportation and supported employment assistance so that they can complete successful community-based, paid internships. Furthermore, the goal is for the EPIC project to continue assisting youth as they leave high school helping them form community-based individualized resource teams that will help them and their families identify resources, services, and opportunities for competitive integrated employment.

Transportation will likely require a similar approach. As part of their community-based instruction and work-based learning, students have opportunities to practice taking public transportation on the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC). Many work-based learning experiences have been planned along routes running from partnering high schools to businesses. Schools are also permitted to make transportation requests to assist groups of students in accessing work-based learning experiences that take place between 10am and 2pm. However, when students are matched with employers that may have only one student and are not on GRTC bus lines, then transportation becomes more challenging. EPIC is helping Project PEACE work with DARS so that students can have transportation paid for through Pre-ETS. Temporarily, travel vouchers for ride-share companies like Uber or Lyft could be made available for youth and accompanying adults while viable long-term solutions are being developed.

Paid Work-Based Learning

To prepare youth with IDD for employment after high school, they need to access paid, community job experiences while in high school. Our multi-step plan is expected to culminate in

a work-based learning experience. We use the term “work-based learning” to remain flexible to a number of paid outcomes, such as an internship, entrepreneurship, or even a supervised agricultural experience.

A work-based learning training agreement and training plan would have to be constructed as formal agreements between students, parents/guardians, WBL coordinator, and employers. These documents outline expectations for all parties and carefully delineate which aspects of job learning and training take place in the classroom and work site. These and other mechanisms will be used to monitor and evaluate the mutual impacts for youth and business. Formative evaluation will provide opportunities to improve experiences and outcomes for youth and businesses alike.

Conclusion

The Project PEACE plan for community employment transition was built with the insights of our community and our partners. Like our community landscape analysis it is a living document— one that will likely endure amendments and revisions throughout. What is more, this plan is one that needs to be implemented in conjunction with activities currently underway by families, schools, and communities to support goals and aspirations of youth with IDD. The plan is not intended to supplement, not replace activities. We remain committed to improving employment outcomes for youth with IDD and will monitor the implementation of this plan to gain evidence about what practices best promote competitive integrated employment.



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