

COLONIAL HEIGHTS PLAN FOR EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION

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Colonial Heights Plan for Employment Transition

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Colonial Heights Plan for Employment Transition

Summary

The Colonial Heights Plan for Employment Transition was developed through Project PEACE, a community-driven initiative to strengthen local systems supporting youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) as they prepare for employment. Rooted in the belief that communities are best positioned to identify their own challenges and design solutions, the plan reflects the voices of Colonial Heights students, families, educators, employers, and agency partners working together to build inclusive pathways to meaningful work.

Virginia's statewide commitment to college and career readiness provides a strong foundation for this local effort. Through partnerships with the Department of Education, the Center on Transition Innovations (CTI), the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), and SOAR 365, students gain access to state-of-the-art transition practices, Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), and inclusive postsecondary opportunities. Colonial Heights' plan builds upon these statewide initiatives by identifying practical, locally feasible strategies that connect early classroom experiences to long-term employment outcomes.

Project PEACE facilitated a series of community conversations and collaborative planning meetings in 2024–25 to guide development of this plan. Through these sessions, participants identified shared goals and designed an employment transition model emphasizing early preparation, family engagement, business partnerships, and ongoing assessment. The resulting plan outlines a four-step sequence of student experiences: student-led enterprise, group work-based learning in the community, individual work-based learning within the school, and individualized community work-based learning with matched employers. Each stage is supported by targeted family outreach, professional development for educators, and collaboration with DARS counselors and local businesses.

Together, these strategies support existing approaches in Colonial Heights to create a sustainable system where students with IDD gain the confidence, skills, and experiences needed for competitive, integrated employment. The plan demonstrates how coordinated local action, supported by state resources and guided by community expertise, can expand opportunity, strengthen inclusion, and ensure that every student who wants to work has a pathway to do so.

Part I: Context for the Plan

Virginia's Employment Transition Efforts

Across Virginia, a broad network of initiatives and partnerships works to improve employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has prioritized preparing all students to be college and career ready, offering extensive guidance on implementing high-quality work-based learning (HQWBL) opportunities at every grade level.

To strengthen these efforts, the Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) provides expertise in developing and supporting transition programs such as *Start on Success* and *Discovering Me!*. CTI also delivers professional development and technical assistance to educators and administrators, helping them improve pathways to employment and postsecondary education. Under CTI's umbrella, the VCU ACE-IT in College program offers inclusive postsecondary opportunities for students with IDD by combining access to VCU coursework with paid and unpaid work experiences both on campus and in the community.

The Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) also plays a key role in school-to-work transitions. Through partnerships with local high schools, DARS counselors provide individualized transition supports, train employers to create inclusive workplaces, and manage numerous Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) opportunities. DARS also funds the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center, where students can complete career assessments and explore a range of career clusters through hands-on activities.

Together, these initiatives create a strong statewide foundation for transition to employment. Yet within each community, unique local strengths, needs, and relationships shape how these opportunities take root. Building on those assets, Project PEACE seeks to expand and sustain inclusive employment pathways that reflect the expertise and priorities of each participating community.

Project PEACE and Community Leadership

Project PEACE was designed to complement Virginia's existing transition resources while centering *community expertise and leadership*. The project is grounded in the belief that those most affected by an issue are best positioned to define and address it. Accordingly, Project PEACE aims to shift power, knowledge, and decision-making from external experts to local community members—enabling authentic, community-driven change.

This approach emphasizes three guiding principles:

1. Those most affected by a problem should help define and solve it. Project PEACE facilitates *community conversations* that bring together people with IDD, families, educators, employers, and service providers to identify local challenges and opportunities.
2. Communities can build their own capacity and confidence to lead change. Through professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals, and family learning opportunities supported by the Center for Family Involvement and Pre-ETS Navigators, Project PEACE invests in the people who drive progress locally.
3. Communities are capable of designing, implementing, and evaluating their own initiatives. Project PEACE operates within the Administration for Community Living's (ACL) Community Collaboratives for Employment (CCE) framework, which supports community-led efforts to improve employment outcomes for youth with IDD through local systems collaboration.

This Colonial Heights Plan for Employment Transition reflects the work of the Colonial Heights Community Collaborative. It is a living document, subject to review and adaptation by Colonial Heights Public Schools (CHPS) to ensure feasibility and alignment with local goals—while also fulfilling Project PEACE's grant objectives. Project PEACE began with early implementation in Richmond Public Schools before expanding collaboration with Colonial Heights; both communities continue to receive ongoing support at different project stages.

Community Context: Colonial Heights, Virginia

Like the youth it serves, every community has its own strengths, preferences, histories, advocates, and support systems. For this project, *community* refers to those living or working within the Colonial Heights Public Schools catchment area.

Colonial Heights is an independent city in central Virginia covering approximately eight square miles with about 19,000 residents. Located along the Appomattox River, it borders Chesterfield County and the City of Petersburg and remains closely connected to Chesterfield through shared resources, such as the Department of Social Services.

Colonial Heights Public Schools (CHPS), which include three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, serves as one of the city's primary employers. In the 2024–2025 school year, about 18% of CHPS students received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including students with IDD, and 61% met the economically disadvantaged criteria. Despite these challenges, the district maintains strong outcomes: more than 90% of high school seniors graduate with a standard or advanced diploma, and 62% pursue higher education. The high school's relatively small enrollment (fewer than 1,000 students)

fosters a close-knit environment conducive to individualized planning and community partnerships.

While Project PEACE does not claim to represent every voice in the city, its Community Collaborative includes a broad cross-section of stakeholders—people with IDD, family members, educators (teachers, case managers, paraprofessionals, and retired educators), employers, and representatives from supportive agencies and organizations. Together, they form a local network dedicated to improving employment outcomes for youth with IDD through collaboration, inclusion, and community-led action.

Colonial Heights High School and Project PEACE Partnership

During development of the Project PEACE proposal, the VCU Partnership for People with Disabilities reached out to the Colonial Heights Public Schools Director of Support Services to discuss the project's intent. A letter of collaboration was signed, outlining a shared commitment to improving employment outcomes for youth with IDD by engaging the local community as co-planners and leaders.

In the third year of Project PEACE, the team connected with CHPS's current Director of Support Services and the Colonial Heights High School (CHHS) lead special education teacher. Through initial conversations, CHPS emphasized the importance of acting and planning simultaneously. Early efforts included training and technical assistance to develop a student-led enterprise (SLE) and seed funding to launch it.

Additional professional development opportunities were offered through Project PEACE, allowing teachers to attend state and national Council for Exceptional Children, Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) conferences. PEACE also collaborated with VCU's CTI to provide training on strengths-based employment development for educators across elementary, middle, and high school levels.

CHPS played a key role in recruiting participants for community conversations and the community collaborative, hosting all meetings at CHHS. Over the past year, CHHS and Project PEACE have partnered to offer students campus tours of VCU and the VCU ACE-IT in College program. Project PEACE also supported CHHS in securing job coaching for students participating in on-campus work activities.

To sustain progress, Project PEACE and CHPS hold monthly check-ins to coordinate communication, share updates, and collaboratively plan new opportunities for students, families, and educators.

Part II: Developing the Plan

Project PEACE conducted three community conversations during the 2024 calendar year using the World Café method, which brings diverse community members together in small, rotating discussion groups to share ideas, build mutual understanding, and collaboratively identify solutions to local challenges. Through this process, the Colonial Heights community shared perspectives on barriers, possible solutions, and collective hopes for the future.

The group created a vision built around a single, unifying hope: that every student with an intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) who desires employment will experience a seamless transition from work-based learning to community employment. They imagined a future where all students have the self-determination and skills necessary to thrive in a variety of workplace settings. This vision highlights key priorities, including:

1. Students who want employment have a pathway to achieve it.
2. The transition from school to work is seamless.
3. Workplace skills are developed that can be applied across multiple settings.

The Colonial Heights Community Collaborative formed as a partnership among people with disabilities, family members, employers, schools, organizations, and agencies working together to translate this vision into action. While participants rotated in and out based on availability, the core membership remained stable and committed. Core members included a self-advocate, family members, a DARS counselor, CTI staff, the Colonial Heights special education mentor teacher, and the Family Resource Coordinator. Around these core members, other community and school division representatives contributed as their schedules allowed, maintaining the shared charge of bridging the community's vision with actionable steps to improve employment outcomes for youth with IDD.

Project PEACE facilitated three community collaborative meetings to support this process and guide the development of a shared plan.

Community Collaborative Meeting 1 (February, 2025)

The first meeting introduced the purpose of the Community Collaborative and described how members' lived experiences would inform the plan. Members were encouraged to use their personal perspectives to recommend activities and processes to improve the transition to employment for students with IDD. The Project PEACE team also shared Richmond's plan for community employment as an example of how developing a guiding model could serve as a roadmap for implementing activities that improve students' likelihood of employment after high school.

In the first planning activity, collaborative subgroups used an à la carte menu of transition activities to select and sequence those they felt would best lead to employment opportunities. They then described the steps needed for each activity to take place. Identified activities are summarized in Table 1.

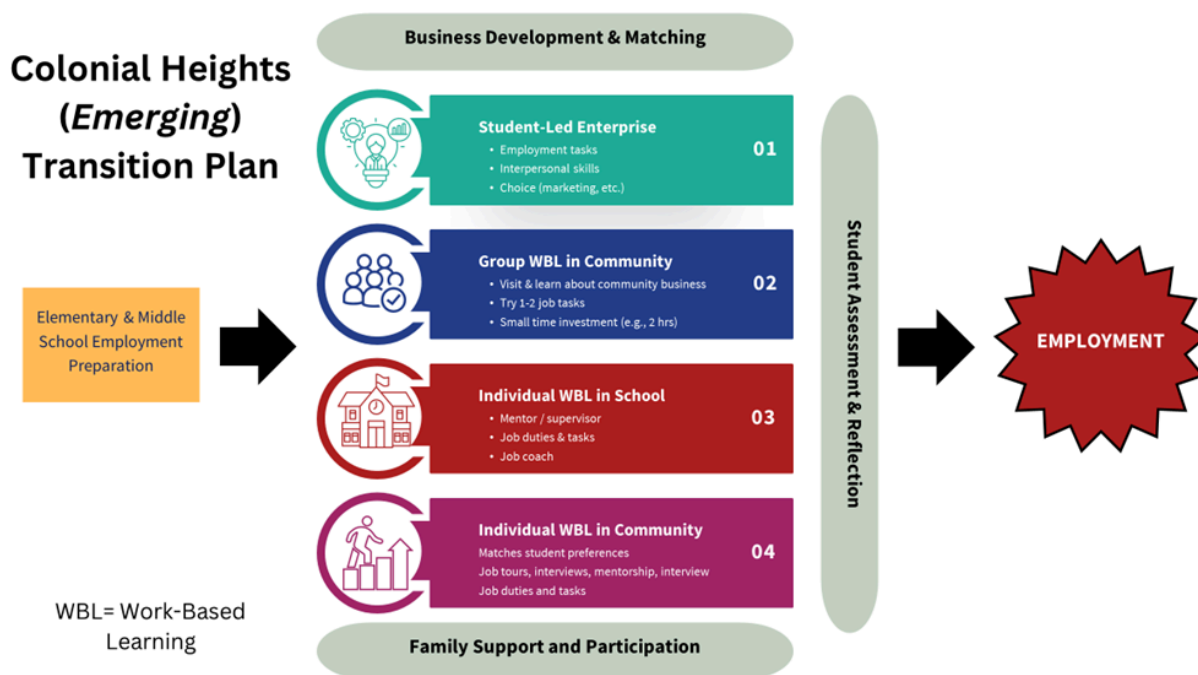
Table 1. Activities Identified to Promote Employment Transition

Group 1	Group 2
Improve Student-Led Enterprise • Include student-led marketing • Take field trips to employers (e.g., coffee shops) or invite employees as guest speakers • Support students in developing a social media presence School-based work experiences • Develop student jobs in the library, office/administration, custodial work, greenhouse work, and build from interests such as animal care or poultry	Building family capacity and buy-in • Develop IEP toolkits to support families and embed work experiences into IEP discussions • Hold informal “Cup of Comfort” meetings for families to discuss employment • Organize meetings between businesses and families Businesses • Encourage businesses to meet with students and families • Invite businesses to opt into work-based learning opportunities (e.g., Dunlop House) • Recognize and celebrate participating businesses • Create a template for business partnerships Peer-mentorship • Facilitate visits with college students with IDD • Develop mentorship with students without disabilities Start Early • Begin career exploration in middle school • Improve transfer of employment experiences and preferences from middle to high school • Match high school students with work-based learning opportunities aligned with their interests

By combining the activities identified by collaborative members, an employment transition process model was developed (Figure 1). The model illustrates early preparation as an essential

foundation for high school employment activities and emphasizes the importance of continuous family collaboration, business development, and student assessment. Central to the model is a sequence of stages through which Colonial Heights students progress, each contributing to exposure, opportunities, and experiences that cumulatively prepare them for post-school employment.

Figure 1. Colonial Heights Plan for Employment Transition: Draft Model



Community Collaborative Meeting 2 (May, 2025)

In the second meeting, members reviewed the full qualitative findings from the Colonial Heights community conversations. Their first activity was to identify how the emerging transition plan aligned or differed from the findings. Members observed that while community conversations identified several systemic barriers—such as ableist attitudes, transportation limitations, and the lack of school personnel specifically focused on transition—the emerging plan emphasized activities that could be implemented at the school level with support from close community partners.

The second activity focused on refining the transition plan and identifying missing components or underrepresented ideas. These discussions did not alter the model’s structure but provided greater clarity and depth, particularly regarding access to Pre-ETS, self-determination, and

assessment practices. The group also highlighted the need for consistent monitoring of activities throughout implementation (see Table 2).

Table 2. Identified Opportunities for Transition Plan Improvement

Pre-ETS	Student and Family Ownership	Assessment: Monitoring and Evaluating the Plan
• Initiate Pre-ETS conversations early • Connect with local businesses • Emphasize workplace readiness and soft skills training • Encourage household chores and responsibilities that reinforce work habits • Discuss employment goals in IEPs • Refer students to Pre-ETS early • Invite employers to the school	• Involve students in IEP meetings • Provide opportunities to role-play employment interactions • Teach self-advocacy and self-determination skills • Include the Center for Family Involvement	• Conduct interest and skills assessments at the beginning of the year • Incorporate student self-assessments and reflections on work-based learning • Encourage students to create employment scrapbooks or portfolios • Use photos or videos to document experiences • Collect ongoing survey data for evaluation

Community Collaborative Meeting 3 (September, 2025)

The third meeting began with a review of prior discussions and data. Members then engaged in a community mapping activity, building on a baseline transition asset map of Colonial Heights to identify and add local resources that could connect students, families, and educators with employment-related opportunities. Members also identified potential employers and organizations aligned with student interests.

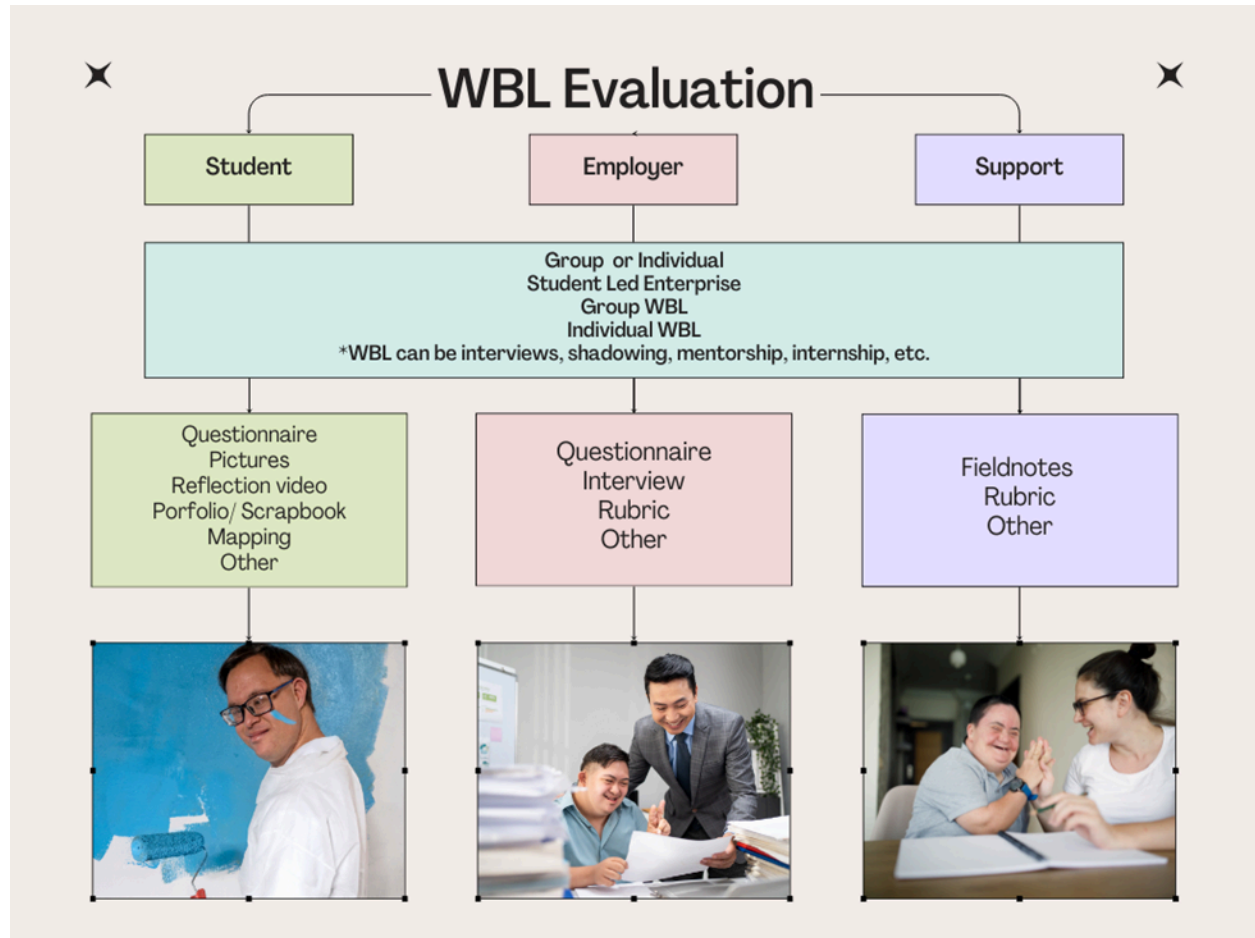
Next, members noted that the initial plan lacked robust strategies for assessing and evaluating work-based learning experiences. Groups reviewed a menu of evaluation methods (see Figure 2) designed for three audiences: students, school professionals, and employers. They discussed each method and selected those most feasible and effective for implementation.

After documenting preferences, the group reached consensus on the following recommendations:

- **Students:** Use visual documentation such as photos or videos to capture work-based learning experiences and build employment portfolios.
- **Supports** (teachers or paraprofessionals): Use rubrics and field notes to track progress across all participating students.

- **Employers:** Complete virtual surveys to provide quick, consistent feedback on student performance and satisfaction with the experience.

Figure 2. Tool for Collaborative Members to Discuss WBL Assessment



The collaborative emphasized that accessible, visual, and student-centered evaluation methods would help students reflect on their growth while providing educators and employers with practical data for continuous improvement. Members also expressed interest in adapting Richmond Public Schools’ *Photovoice* implementation guide to help students document and share their experiences more meaningfully.

Finally, during the closing activity, members ranked key areas of emphasis for the 2025–26 school year on a scale of 1 to 6 (with 1 as the highest priority). The results, averaged across all responses, revealed the top three priorities:

1. Family support, including connecting families with Pre-ETS Navigators and offering family information and training sessions

2. Student work-based learning assessments that capture employment experiences at home, school, and in the community
3. Expanding in-school work-based learning to include more students and job opportunities (e.g., Parks and Recreation, the greenhouse, and other school-based enterprises)

Each community collaborative meeting addressed a different aspect of the plan, with the discussions collectively shaping a cohesive, community-driven approach to employment transition for students with IDD in Colonial Heights.

Part III: The Plan for Employment Transition

The Plan for Employment Transition (the “Plan”) considered antecedents to build the framework on which students, families, teachers, and others are to operate. Exposure to the possibility of employed futures was a seed that needed to be sowed early in the fertile fields of school, home, and community. Some activities, including capacity building and exposure to resources, needed to be ongoing to support students’ career exploration and development. The community knew from experience that key champions, supporters, and actors change over time and that opportunities to learn never cease—not for students, families, educators, or businesses. Finally, the Collaborative wanted a plan that embedded scaffolding, allowing students to learn about themselves as employees gradually, without having to do it all at once, and to grow developmentally through additional responsibilities and challenges over time. To accomplish these elements, the Colonial Heights Community Collaborative built a plan that is complicated enough to address a system of interwoven actors and agendas while remaining simple enough to communicate to those embarking on their journey to employment and those supporting them along the way.

Setting the Stage

The VDOE’s Standards of Learning include repeated opportunities for students to explore numerous occupations across seventeen career clusters. The goal is to help students understand broad career options before narrowing their employment interests and aligning school experiences accordingly. Yet there remains a gap between knowing about career types and directly engaging in work experiences. Only through active engagement can students discover whether their assumptions about a job or a workplace match their perceptions after experiencing the realities of a job. Students with intellectual disabilities are often among those with the least access to such experiences, in part because of limited expectations for employment. Recognizing this, the Collaborative proposed efforts to ensure that students with disabilities and their families are exposed early to employment expectations and behaviors that support the development of workplace skills.

The Collaborative identified a best practice already supported by research: transition planning should begin in early childhood. This process often starts with high expectations for employment shared by both parents and teachers. When these expectations are translated into practice, they naturally lead to a focus on students' strengths. When teachers and parents communicate the many strengths they observe across contexts, students build self-awareness and confidence. Combining that understanding of strengths with purposeful exposure to different careers—through career days, field trips, and guest speakers—helps students connect their preferences with possible occupations. For example, a student fascinated by keys and locks might learn about locksmithing, key cutting, or lock manufacturing, or explore security careers that involve protecting homes and businesses.

Teachers and families can also create contexts in which students practice workplace skills. Classrooms and schools provide natural opportunities to learn cooperation, communication, help-seeking, timeliness, and other soft skills. Even at a young age, teachers can introduce class or school jobs and use simple application processes to mirror workplace expectations. With planning, schools can establish student-led enterprises in which students design and operate small businesses. Parents can reinforce these lessons at home by assigning chores and responsibilities that match their child's developmental readiness and by encouraging independence.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings offer a valuable setting for students, families, and educators to plan and reflect on employment-related goals and progress at home, school, and in the community. Together, the IEP team can emphasize strengths, set new challenges, and track growth. The Collaborative highlighted the importance of this coordination across grade levels: interests and skills identified in elementary or middle school should be documented and shared with the next team so students continue progressing. Similarly, middle-school teams should build on existing strengths and communicate findings to the high-school team. Families and teachers can also share information with DARS Pre-ETS counselors as students near the end of middle school, adding an essential community partner to the circle of communication.

Resources for Families and Teachers to Engage in Early Transition Preparation

- PEATC: <https://peatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Transition-Planning-for-the-Future-Be-Ready-Start-Early.pdf>
- CTI Webinar: <https://centerontransition.org/resources/webcasts/details.cfm/630>
- CTI Self-Paced Course: <https://centerontransition.org/courses/earlytransitionplanning/>

Ongoing Actions

It is not by chance that in the earliest stages of transition planning, the Collaborative introduced some crucial actions, including family support and participation, ongoing student assessment, and reflection. These activity domains, along with business development, were identified as requiring ongoing attention at all phases of the Plan's implementation. Excluding families, businesses, or assessment would fragment the sequential activities designed to prepare students for employment. Many ongoing activities are related to raising awareness of resources, opportunities, and practices, and they are interconnected: businesses and families may work together outside of school through volunteer, service, or career exploration opportunities. Businesses gain valuable insight about children and youth with IDD, while parents, businesses, and students reflect together on student strengths and experiences.

Family Support and Participation

The Collaborative never described any employment activity or approach that excluded families. The overall sentiment was that families should be involved early and often in all career exploration and preparation. Families have intimate knowledge about students' strengths and dreams, knowledge others may be unaware of. They have watched their child grow and learn from the beginning, and that knowledge should be applied to learning about careers and engaging in work activities. Families also reinforce student growth outside school, providing opportunities and communicating their belief in their child. As the primary support system, families remain critical for sustaining employment opportunities and outcomes as teachers, VR counselors, and others rotate in and out of the child's life.

The Collaborative described numerous ways to involve families. Students, schools, and families work together to identify opportunities for students to acquire developmentally appropriate responsibilities at home. This may include goals to fade support with self-care activities, listening to student interests, and co-developing chore charts that expand over time. It can also include family volunteer opportunities with community organizations, neighborhoods, and congregations.

The Collaborative acknowledged that families have competing obligations and stressors. The Colonial Heights family engagement specialist sought to create multiple opportunities for families to participate in IEP meetings, informal safe meetings with other families to discuss employment fears and expectations, and meetings with families and businesses to support volunteer, service, and work-based learning experiences. Families are encouraged to connect with the Center for Family Involvement and Pre-ETS Navigators—family members trained to provide emotional support and guidance on Pre-ETS enrollment.

The Little Feet Meet, an annual Special Olympics event where students with disabilities engage in sports and activities with peers, was identified as an excellent opportunity for family

engagement. Recommendations included an information tent to share resources, school updates, and student successes across age levels. These activities, combined with opportunities for parents to reflect on their child's employment-based growth, were identified as ways to maintain partnerships and enhance student outcomes.

Student Assessment and Reflection

Just as families need opportunities to reflect, assess, and communicate about their child's employment growth, students also require ongoing opportunities to reflect and self-assess. Students are never too young for those around them to communicate that their opinions, preferences, and feelings are important and necessary. This may start with regular check-ins allowing students to share what they enjoy, what they do well, and the types of supports they find helpful. Assessment provides practical data for career exploration and work-based learning, while honoring and developing self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills.

The Collaborative recognized that ongoing self-assessment enables students to reflect on their journey and growth. Work-based learning experiences—including career assessments, situational assessments, and programs like *Discovering Me!*—should be documented visually from the students' perspectives.

Visual assessment offers many advantages. Photographing or videoing experiences allows students to celebrate, reflect, and manage their identities. For example, a student exploring retail tasks may document preferences for lighting, temperature, or independent versus team activities. Visual records capture before-and-after outcomes, such as planting seedlings or organizing supplies, helping students communicate strengths, preferences, and support needs.

Over multiple experiences, visual and written reflections create a comprehensive employment portfolio spanning home, school, and community experiences. Portfolios can be shared in IEP meetings, with DARS counselors, and with employers as a visual resume. Encouraging self-assessment empowers students to take an active role in career development, building independence and confidence while providing data for job development and placement.

Resources:

- *Discovering Me!*: <https://centerontransition.org/publications/download.cfm?id=152>
- *I Want to Work Workbook*:
https://cdl.partnership.vcu.edu/media/center-for-disability-leadership---partnership/want_to_work_workbook_rev01.06.2020.pdf

- Photovoice Implementation guide:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MdisQWsOgqTG8T1jNOZlQ2RbPjeLRMDE/view?usp=sharing>

Business Development

Work-based learning and employment are not possible without employer awareness of the value and possibility of these experiences. “Business development” refers to opportunities for employers to learn about the benefits of partnering with schools and employing youth with IDD. The Collaborative emphasized informal and incidental learning events to educate, collaborate, and dispel myths.

The Collaborative identified local businesses employing or engaging people with disabilities and highlighted that community awareness of inclusive hiring practices strengthens reputation, customer loyalty, and workplace climate. Families, teachers, and community allies are more likely to support businesses with inclusive practices, which benefits the business bottom line.

Teachers play a critical role by sharing information about school-based employment preparation, inviting employers to classroom events, career days, or reverse job fairs, and hosting students for tours and task participation. More in-depth opportunities include paid and unpaid internships. DARS and SOAR365 also engage businesses to provide information on supported employment, liability, incentives, and success stories. The Metropolitan Business League offers training opportunities to businesses in its network.

Passive strategies, such as one-page summaries of student training, positive experiences, and contact information, along with encouraging customer testimonials, help educate and recruit businesses. These strategies reinforce the community’s commitment to improving employment outcomes for students with IDD.

Sequential Steps

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are at the center of this plan. The Collaborative wanted students to have active, meaningful opportunities to engage in work-based learning throughout their high school experience. High-quality work-based learning connects classroom instruction with real-world environments to build career readiness.

The Collaborative reviewed current practices in early 2025 and considered new activities still to be implemented. They agreed on a four-step sequence designed to prepare students with IDD for employment:

1. Student-led enterprise
2. Group work-based experiences at local businesses

3. Individual work-based experiences within the school
4. Individual work-based experiences with matched employers in the community

Student-Led Enterprise

From the beginning of its collaboration with Project PEACE, Colonial Heights High School expressed interest in building a student-led enterprise (SLE). Project PEACE provided professional learning, technical assistance, and initial resources to support the effort, launching an in-school coffee and snack cart. The initial implementation provided a concrete example to build from and a foundation for future improvement.

The goal of the SLE was to help students practice 21st Century Workplace Readiness Skills such as problem-solving, following directions, customer service, math (e.g., exchanging money), and professionalism. Students rotated among roles—brewing coffee, cleaning, taking and filling orders, restocking supplies, and counting money. Through these experiences, teachers observed students’ abilities in real time while students interacted with peers and staff in new ways. Although the pilot faced some challenges, the overall concept proved successful.

The Collaborative discussed several ways to strengthen the model. First, they identified opportunities to give students greater ownership over the enterprise. Students could design logos, assist with marketing, develop seasonal offerings, serve at school or community events, and brainstorm creative adaptations when faced with challenges.

Members also emphasized the importance of integrating assessment into the model. Students could take pictures or short videos to reflect on their experiences—what they enjoyed, where they excelled, and where they needed more support. Teachers and support staff could document student strengths across roles. One member suggested using video to capture student successes to share with the school community. Another proposed that local businesses could “appraise” the student-led enterprise, providing professional feedback while building stronger school-business relationships.

Finally, the Collaborative suggested using Project PEACE training modules and Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) resources to ensure best practices and lessons learned are shared with both students and educators in middle and high school.

Resources

- PEACE SLE Modules:
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/14nCWX0wcZSvvvy0SE0JOHSoUvK71a1?usp=sharing>

- CTI Publication:
<https://centerontransition.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=1248>

Group Work-Based Learning in the Community

While student-led enterprise provides many advantages, community-based experiences also play a critical role. Students practice transportation, gain exposure to a broader array of work environments and tasks, develop contact with community employers, and generalize workplace readiness skills in new settings.

Community-based instruction has long prepared students for successful adult life by helping them apply classroom learning in real environments. However, work-based learning takes this further by immersing students in authentic employment settings, directly preparing them for competitive, integrated work after high school. It also allows students to test their assumptions about job preferences. For instance, a student who loves animals may discover that the sounds and smells of an animal care setting are overwhelming. Experiences like this help students clarify both what they want to do and what they do not.

To support these experiences, schools would coordinate with local businesses and organizations and arrange transportation for students during school hours. Students might participate in one or two visits per site to tour the workplace, meet employees, and try selected tasks. They would take photos to document their activities and later use them for reflection. Over the course of a year, students could participate in several such experiences, building self-awareness and compiling an employment portfolio. Data from student reflections and staff assessments could then guide matching students to the next phase of work-based learning.

Individual Work-Based Learning in the School

During the 2024–25 school year, Colonial Heights High School piloted individual work-based learning (WBL) experiences on school grounds. Examples included students matched with the librarian and custodian. Students began by shadowing staff and gradually performed job tasks with the support of a job coach.

This model offered several advantages. It eliminated transportation barriers, was feasible to staff, and involved tasks transferable to other job sites. It also introduced students to the concept of job coaching. To expand this model, the Collaborative identified the need to scale from a pilot to a sustainable activity serving more students.

Job coaches are essential for support and assessment. One solution may be to train paraprofessionals in supported employment practices. Another is to identify funding for paid job coaches. Colonial Heights High School had previously used grant funding to pay a retired special education teacher an hourly wage to serve in this role. Natural supports or trained volunteers

could also help sustain the model as a bridge between group and individualized employment experiences.

The pilot succeeded largely because staff identified meaningful tasks and provided consistent support. The Collaborative hopes to expand opportunities in the school greenhouse and front office and strengthen partnerships with Colonial Heights Parks and Recreation, which manages athletic fields and equipment maintenance. These connections could yield new in-school job placements for students.

The school will also need to plan for transitions between school-based WBL and community-based employment. Matching students with appropriate work environments is a key feature of strength-based transition planning. At this stage, students with open Pre-ETS cases should begin working with their DARS counselors to open vocational rehabilitation (VR) cases. Evidence of workplace readiness skills developed through earlier work-based learning and Pre-ETS activities can support eligibility. Families and DARS counselors will help coordinate transportation and employment supports through Employment Service Organizations (ESOs) such as SOAR365, which has expanded staffing in the Crater Region.

Resources

- [A Guide to Networking with Businesses](#)
- [A Guide to Increasing Independence on a Job Site](#)

Individual Work-Based Learning in the Community

Finally, individual WBL in the community serves as a critical step toward community-integrated employment. Opportunities may include informational interviews, job tours, job shadowing, and internships. The goal is repeated, scheduled experiences where students complete agreed-upon tasks in authentic community work environments.

The structure of each experience may vary. For instance, one business might host students twice a week for two-hour shifts over six weeks, while another might offer longer placements. These opportunities are best suited for students who have completed the earlier stages—student-led enterprise, group community work-based learning, and individual school-based experiences. Students will typically be between ages 17 and 22 and approaching graduation.

At this stage, students may cycle back through earlier phases as needed to refine their skills and narrow their employment interests. Once assessments show that students have developed workplace readiness and identified preferred job types, they are ready for extended community placements.

The Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) presented to the Collaborative about the EPIC grant and its role in preparing for community-integrated employment. The group expressed interest in using Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs), a feature of EPIC, to coordinate planning and support for students. IRTs bring together students, families, DARS, ESOs, developmental disability service agencies, and supportive friends or community members to identify employment options and resources.

The goal is for each student to graduate or exit school with a clear employment plan—or, ideally, with a job already secured.

Resources:

- PEACE SLE Modules:
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/14nCWX0X0wcZSvvvy0SE0JOHSoUvK71a1?usp=sharing>
- CTI: <https://centerontransition.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=1248>
- <https://worksupport.com/documents/AGuidetoNetworkingwithBusinesses.pdf>
- <https://worksupport.com/documents/AGuidetoIncreasingIndependenceonaJobSite.pdf>

Conclusion

The four-step sequence represents more than a set of activities; it reflects Colonial Heights' shared belief that employment preparation should be intentional, inclusive, and continuous. Each stage—student-led enterprise, group work-based learning, individual experiences in school, and individual experiences in the community—builds on the last, gradually transferring responsibility and confidence to the student. As families, educators, employers, and agency partners collaborate to implement these steps, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities gain both the skills and the self-determination needed to pursue meaningful, competitive employment. Through this plan, the Colonial Heights community demonstrates how local partnerships can turn high expectations into everyday opportunities for young people to succeed at work and in life.

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**This Project was supported, in part, but grant number 90DNCE0004 - 01 - 00,
From the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and
Human Services, Washington D.C. 20201**



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