

Establishing School-Business Partnerships to Offer Work-Based Learning Experiences

Research has demonstrated that a strong predictor of post-secondary employment for students with disabilities is participation in meaningful work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) during high school. WBLEs that occur in the community require a collaborative relationship between employers and schools to provide structured learning experiences for students (Hoff et al., 2021). Creating opportunities for WBLEs is not always an easy task because the availability and willingness of local businesses can vary. This brief will explore how schools and businesses can establish effective partnerships in order to offer meaningful WBLEs to students with disabilities.

What are School-Business Partnerships?

The term “school-business partnership” refers to an agreement between a school and a business to offer opportunities for students with disabilities to engage in WBLEs. These WBLEs may include job sampling, internships, apprenticeships, summer employment, and other employment preparation within the businesses. When entering a partnership with a school, businesses commit to establishing meaningful work experiences with supervision and feedback provided by business staff. In turn, the partnering school team agrees to provide job coaching and training to support student learning. Successful school-business partnerships have clearly defined expectations and documented agreements to ensure that the school, business, and most importantly the students, benefit from the experience.

What the Research Says

To create meaningful and sustainable partnerships, schools and businesses must understand each other’s needs. In recent research, Valentini et al. (2019) conducted interviews with 13 business managers and owners to understand their experiences and recommendations for effective school-business partnerships. Participants viewed the benefits of school business partnerships as expanding productivity at the workplace, having job coaches to supervise students, contributing to a positive work atmosphere, providing a hiring pipeline, helping employees learn about diversity, and expanding professional networks. Challenges to sustaining these partnerships centered on program organization, time investment, setting expectations, and communication. Participants’ recommendations for creating effective school-business partnerships are summarized in Table 1.

A common avenue for developing partnerships is to connect with the Chamber of Commerce. In a survey of 135 representatives from chambers of commerce and business networks, Carter et al. (2009) found that over three-quarters reported their mission statement included working with youth. Most participants agreed that implementing activities with youth that were of short duration were more feasible than activities of longer duration. The most feasible activities were posting information on the website about the school’s vocational program, identifying employers for job shadowing experiences, and inviting school personnel to talk about their students’ employment needs. Activities with students with disabilities were considered less feasible than activities with students without disabilities. Although respondents indicated many activities were feasible, few implemented activities during the year. Findings suggest the need for schools to be prepared to provide guidance and resources to businesses that increase their awareness of youth with disabilities, their capabilities, and the supports that go along with such programming.

Table 1*Employers' Recommendations for Creating Effective School-Business Partnerships*

Recommendations for Schools	Recommendations for Businesses
Define clear expectations and address concerns prior to establishing partnerships	Connect with and learn from other businesses that have experience with school-business partnerships
Be persistent and discuss opportunities with business supervisors and owners	Secure staff buy-in by addressing concerns with current employees prior to beginning the partnership
Identify and share business-specific benefits that would result from a partnership	Get to know the individual strengths and goals of participating students
Provide support to students at the worksite	Choose tasks that match student abilities and foster skill development
Maintain ongoing communication throughout the partnership	Set a trial period to see if establishing a partnership meets the needs of both the school and business
Be familiar with the specific industry and their needs prior to approaching a potential business partner	Ensure students are valued and treated with respect by all employees
Share student strengths, abilities, and interests with partners	Understand the need for flexibility based on the school calendar and events that might impact scheduling or attendance
Conduct ongoing evaluation of program implementation and effectiveness	

Note. Adapted from Valentini et al. (2019).

Guidelines for Practice

Understanding the perspectives of employers regarding school-business partnerships is key to creating WBLEs for students with disabilities. In addition to the recommendations in Table 1, educators seeking to secure and maintain partnerships with local businesses might consider the following key takeaways from the research.

- 1. Engage in discussions with leaders of local businesses.** Whether approaching an individual business or local chamber of commerce, be prepared to clearly communicate the benefits and expectations of a partnership. If a business is hesitant to partner, consider establishing a trial period or encourage them to observe another business with an existing program.
- 2. Every partnership will be different.** Each business will bring unique WBLEs that will require an individualized program structure to be successful. Take time to examine the specific business needs and workplace culture to ensure that the partnership will meet the needs of the specific business and the educational needs of the students.
- 3. Communication is key.** Establish and maintain a system for ongoing communication between the school team and the business partner. Keep the lines of communication open so that any questions or concerns are efficiently managed and do not jeopardize the partnership if left unaddressed.

Additional Resources

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C)
transitionta.org/topics/pre-ets/pre-ets-wble

Provides information on a range of work-based learning experiences and related laws.

**Department of Labor
 Inclusive Internship Programs Guide**
www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/pdf/inclusiveinternshipprograms.pdf

Designed for employers to learn about the benefits and logistics of facilitating internship programs that attract all young adults, including those with disabilities.

References

- Carter, E. W., Trainor, A. A., Cakiroglu, O., Cole, O., Swedeen, B., Ditchman, N., & Owens, L. (2009). Exploring school-employer partnerships to expand career development and early work experiences for youth with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 32(3), 145–159.
- Hoff, D., Stoehr, M., Roy, S., & DeYoung, A. (2021, April). *Work-based learning for students with high support needs: Themes, strategies, and policy recommendations*. Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment. https://transitionta.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/MPTE_Work-Based_Learning_Brief.pdf
- Valentini, B., Carter, E. W., Bumble, J. L., & Hill, E. (2019). Employer views on school-business partnerships involving students with severe disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 50(3), 365-377. <https://doi-org.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/10.3233/JVR-191019>

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