

Work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) are an essential component of employment preparation for students with disabilities. Through WBLEs (e.g., job shadowing, work sampling, service-learning, internships, paid employment) students develop career interests, connect classroom learning to the real world, and acquire skills needed for successful employment. Developing high quality WBLEs can be challenging. This research brief describes the challenges school personnel encounter when providing WBLEs and strategies to overcome them.

What are the Challenges to Providing WBLEs?

Several researchers have investigated the barriers teachers experience when designing and implementing WBLEs (see Awsumb et al., 2022; Brenner & Dymond, 2023a; Bromley et al, 2022; Rooney-Kron & Dymond, 2021). Among the barriers most frequently cited are those related to transportation, staffing, time, work opportunities, stakeholder support, and student support needs. These barriers appear most problematic when providing WBLEs in the community (as opposed to the school). Transportation is often limited, too costly, results in long commutes, or does not align with WBLE schedules. Staffing barriers include insufficient numbers of staff to supervise students during WBLEs and lack of appropriately trained staff to serve as job coaches. In addition to transportation and staffing, teachers report difficulty finding time to develop WBLEs due to other teaching responsibilities. Limited time to develop WBLEs is further complicated by the challenges involved with finding WBLE opportunities. In some communities there are few worksites available, sites have to be shared with multiple students, school policies limit WBLEs to older students, or sites are not physically accessible. An additional challenge is stakeholder support. At times,

teachers face resistance to providing WBLEs from businesses, school administrators, and parents, who may have concerns about safety, liability, and the benefits of WBLEs for certain students. Teachers of students with extensive support needs (i.e., significant intellectual disability, autism, multiple disabilities) or challenging behaviors have voiced particular difficulty with finding WBLEs that they feel are appropriate for their students.

What the Research Says

Only one study has examined how teachers respond to challenges associated with providing WBLEs. Brenner and Dymond (2023b) conducted in-depth interviews with nine special education teachers of students with extensive support needs. They found that teachers used four types of approaches when responding to challenges associated with WBLEs. One approach was to create WBLEs in the school building when community-based WBLEs were not accessible or available. Second, they networked with school colleagues, families, and community members to identify people they had connections with in the community that might be willing to offer a WBLE, volunteer, or become a job coach. Third, teachers provided direct support to students and families. They pre-taught students the skills and behaviors needed at the WBLE site and they also supported families by helping them to obtain resources (e.g., clothing, hygiene items) their child needed to participate in WBLEs. Lastly, teachers advocated for WBLEs with school administrators, school staff, and business owners. These advocacy efforts focused on obtaining resources (staff, transportation), convincing business owners to offer work experiences, advertising their program, and gaining recognition of their students' abilities.

Guidelines for Practice

Findings from Brenner and Dymond (2023b) suggest several core strategies teachers can use to overcome the challenges they experience to providing WBLEs. These strategies include:

- Network with school colleagues, families, and community members to identify potential WBLEs and solve other challenges associated with implementing WBLEs.
- Pre-teach students the knowledge and skills needed for a WBLE in the classroom so that students are poised for success once they begin their WBLE.
- Educate families about WBLE expectations and their importance to postschool success.
- Support families by connecting them to resources they may need to support their child at a WBLE (e.g., clothing, snacks, hygiene items).
- When it is not possible to provide WBLEs, offer WBLEs in the school building, but continue to advocate for whatever resources are needed to offer WBLEs in the community.
- Advocate with administrators, school staff, families, and community members to help them understand the importance of WBLEs and to have high expectations for students with disabilities.

There are several additional strategies discussed in the literature. Although these strategies are not supported by empirical research, they present an array of options for school personnel to consider (see Table 1).

Table 1

Ideas for Overcoming Challenges

<p><i>Transportation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have parents/school bus drop students off at the WBLE site at the beginning of the day (instead of school) or pick up students at the WBLE site at the end of the day • Share transportation with community agencies • Use the driver’s education vehicle • Have staff obtain a commercial driver’s license to drive school vehicles
<p><i>Staffing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pool resources with neighboring districts and agencies to share staff or training. ▪ Have related services personnel embed instruction on therapy goals at the WBLE site ▪ Use Division of Rehabilitation Services staff to support students during WBLEs ▪ Choose WBLE sites where multiple students can be dispersed at the business and 1:1 staffing can be avoided
<p><i>WBLE Opportunities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engage in community mapping to identify businesses in the community ▪ Hold an employment night where employers can share opportunities. ▪ Provide businesses with written documentation about how liability will be handled ▪ Consider non-profit organizations for WBLEs
<p><i>Stakeholder Support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Educate administrators, school staff, families, and community members about WBLEs ▪ Share information about student successes through emails, newsletters, and brochures ▪ Create an advisory board that includes members of the community who can advise on WBLEs ▪ Join civic/community groups to develop relationships with community members

Note. Ideas drawn from Brenner & Dymond (2023b), Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb (2011), Dymond (2020), Mazzotti & Test (2020), and Whittenburg et al. (2019).

Additional Resources

Overcoming Challenges to Building Successful Work-Based Learning Experiences

youtu.be/VJxkHJg4Z-Q

This ICTW webinar describes the challenges associated with providing WBLEs and practical strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Work-Based Learning for Students with High Support Needs: Themes, Strategies, and Policy Recommendations

employmentfirstma.org/files/MPTE_Work-Based_Learning_Brief.pdf

Strategies for providing WBLEs are described in this brief along with recommendations for structuring WBLEs for students with extensive support needs.

References

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