

The importance of preparing students for post-school employment cannot be overstated. In fact, postschool employment is correlated with improved quality of life (Canha et al., 2013); however, students with disabilities, especially students with significant disabilities, experience lower rates of employment, wages, and benefits compared to peers without disabilities (Cheng & Shaewitz, 2021). When students with disabilities receive work experiences during high school, they are more likely to have improved employment outcomes after school (Mazzotti et al., 2021). School-based enterprises are one type of work experience that may help students with disabilities prepare for employment after high school.

What are School-Based Enterprises?

A school-based enterprise is an entrepreneurial venture within the school setting that operates like a small business. Students are actively engaged in designing, organizing, and managing the day-to-day operations of the enterprise, with support from school personnel. The dynamic nature of school-based enterprises allows students with varying abilities and interests to gain hands-on work experience. These experiences reinforce academic and employability skills learned in the classroom (DECA, 2022).

School-based enterprises typically emerge in response to an identified need in the marketplace for a particular product or service (DECA, 2022). For example, the need for an entity that creates T-shirts for groups sponsoring special events might lead to the creation of an enterprise that prints custom T-shirts. Regardless of the nature of the enterprise, it must fill an ongoing need in the marketplace in order to sustain over time.

Research on School-Based Enterprises

There are two broad types of school-based enterprises. One type sells products whereas the second type provides services (Gamache & Knab, 2018). Products are items that can be sold for a profit. The cost of the products sold are dependent upon the cost of the materials (Gamache & Knab, 2018; NTACTION, 2018). School-based enterprises focused on products usually need to have a high quantity of supplies on hand. For example, a commonly used school-based enterprise is selling coffee from a coffee shop, and related items would include coffee, creamer, cups, lids, stirrers, coffee machines, and more. Although coffee shop school-based enterprises are popular, there are additional school-based enterprises that sell products that can be used to develop work-related skills (see Table 1).

Table 1
School-Based Enterprise Ideas

Product Categories	Types of Products
Agricultural/horticultural products	Flowers, fruits, vegetables
Holiday- or season-specific items	Cards, candygrams, holiday-specific items
School-specific items	Notepads, sticky notes, sweaters, sweatshirts
Food	Cookies, brownies, other student-made snacks
Concession Stands	Candy bars, chips, bottled water

Note. Table based on Gamache & Knab (2018)

Other school-based enterprises provide services. Unlike product-focused school-based enterprises, services are typically labor intensive, but they require lower levels of inventory (Gamache & Knab, 2018). The success of a school-based enterprise focused on service is dependent on developing a positive reputation from customers. To garner a positive reputation, the enterprise must have workers with the skills necessary to effectively provide the service (Gamache & Knab, 2018). There are a variety of services that can be the focus of a school-based enterprise, including car washing, childcare, cleaning, computer repair, gift wrapping, graphics work, lawn care and landscaping, logo creation, photography, and more.

School-based enterprises provide multiple benefits to students, including opportunities to learn and apply skills needed across all jobs, such as reliability, teamwork, and communication skills (Gugerty et al., 2008). In addition, school-based enterprises can help students develop career awareness, engage in career exploration, and develop their strengths, preferences, and interests (Gugerty et al., 2008; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). The benefits of school-based enterprises also include increased academic performance, behavior, and school attendance (Tindall et al., 1996). Last, but not least, school-based enterprises can help students develop self-determination skills (Gamache & Knab, 2018).

Guidelines for Practice

Developing a school-based enterprise occurs in three phases: (a) planning, (b) implementation, and (c) evaluation. In the planning stage, determine the service or product to be provided (Test et al., 2006). Consider the demand and consumer wants for the product or service. To gauge interest, conduct surveys with or interview potential customers. Consider the cost of goods and the feasibility of the enterprise based on time and money. Consider supports needed for students to operate and manage the enterprise with minimal teacher support. Last, consider how this school-based enterprise fits within the general curriculum and can be implemented by peers with and without disabilities (NTACT, 2018).

In the implementation phase, examine the organization of the business. Ensure the school-based enterprise is as close as possible to the authentic work environment (Test et al., 2006). It may be helpful to observe and collaborate with professionals from similar enterprises; this will help the school-based enterprise align with the actual work environment. Consider space, funding, and sustainability. Develop rules, expectations, and procedures for students to follow. This may include procedures for calling off of work, taking breaks, clocking in or out, and taking breaks. Also, outlining job roles is critical and may include supervisor, material handler, inventory control, and accountant roles (NTACT, 2018).

Last, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of the school-based enterprise. For example, it is important to collect data to track student progress. These data may be helpful during transition planning and Individualized Education Program (IEP) development. Data collection tools to track completion, accuracy, and completion of steps involved are helpful. A task analysis, for example, would be an effective way of tracking these data. Performance evaluations are another consideration and may include observation notes and rubrics (NTACT, 2018). Lastly, customer reviews help ensure customer satisfaction with the enterprise.

Additional Resources

School-Based Enterprise Examples
transitionalliancesc.org/school-based-enterprise/

School-Based Enterprise Toolkit
transitionta.org/school-based-enterprise/

School-Based Enterprise Development: Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating
project10.info/Documents/SBE_Manual_with_Final_WM_Edits_Included_7.13.18.pdf

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