

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) is a legislative mandate focused on improving the employment outcomes of secondary students with disabilities. WIOA requires that funding from the State/Federal Vocational Rehabilitation System be used to ensure that state vocational rehabilitation agencies (e.g., Illinois Department of Human Services) in collaboration with schools provide pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) to all students with disabilities who qualify, or could potentially qualify, for vocational rehabilitation services. Under WIOA, vocational rehabilitation counselors and teachers are required to engage students in the following five required pre-ETS: (a) job exploration counseling, (b) work-based learning experiences, (c) counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs, (d) workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, and (e) instruction

in self-advocacy. This research brief will focus on *work-based learning experiences* (WBLEs).

What are WBLEs?

WBLEs utilize real work in order to teach students job skills in natural settings (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center [WINTAC], 2016). WBLEs facilitate connections between what students learn in the classroom and the application of those skills in the real world (WINTAC, 2016). There are seven major types of WBLEs that occur in the community. These include career exploration, job shadowing, service learning, internships, work sampling, apprenticeships, and paid employment (Luecking, 2020). Common WBLEs that occur in the school setting include career technical education courses, on-campus jobs, school-based enterprises, and job clubs/vocational organizations (Mazzotti & Test, 2015). Table 1 describes these WBLEs.

Table 1
Types of WBLEs

Type of WBLE	Definition and Example
Career Exploration	Students tour a workplace or conduct interviews with employees to learn more about different jobs in the community. For example, a student may tour a restaurant to learn about different jobs within the restaurant. These visits are often followed by reflection or discussion about the specific job.
Job Shadowing	Students spend time observing one employee to learn more about the responsibilities of their job. For example, students may spend a day with a floral designer to learn about his or her specific job tasks.
Service Learning	Students receive instruction on work-related skills while also providing a service to the community. For example, students may learn to stock shelves at a food pantry.
Internships	Students have a formal agreement with a workplace for a set amount of time in which they will have a defined role and complete assigned tasks. Internships may be paid or unpaid. For example, a student may have a two-month internship working at the local recreation center performing office-related tasks.

Apprenticeships	Students have a formal agreement with a worksite for an extended period of time in which they will learn specific skills related to a trade. Apprenticeships may be paid or unpaid. For example, a student may work as an apprentice with a local plumber.
Work Sampling	Students spend time at a worksite performing various tasks that “do not materially benefit the employer” (Luecking, 2009, p. 13). For example, a student may work alongside stylists at a local hair salon to assist with restocking supplies and scheduling appointments.
Paid Employment	Students engage in part or full-time work in which they are being paid by the employer while still receiving support from school staff. For example, a student may work at the local grocery store while receiving on-the-job support from a teacher or paraprofessional.
Career and Technical Education Courses (CTE)	Students participate in one or a series of CTE courses which integrate academic content with specific career/occupational skills. For example, a student may enroll in a CTE course specific to a field of their interest, such as health science or business.
On-campus Jobs	Students regularly participate in one or more tasks to support the classroom or school environment that may otherwise be performed by a school staff member or not performed at all. For example, a student may work in the main office stocking supplies or in the library organizing books.
School-based Enterprises	Students develop and operate a business within the school with the support of their teacher(s). For example, students may run a school-based coffee shop and sell drinks and snacks to school staff.
Job Clubs and Vocational Organizations	Students attend an informal group focused on job seeking and networking which may or may not be related to a specific career or field. For example, students may attend an extracurricular job club to work on creating their resume.

Note. Definitions adapted from Luecking (2009) and Rooney-Kron (2021a).

According to WIOA (2014), WBLEs may take place during or outside of school hours and can occur in the school setting or in an integrated community setting alongside individuals without disabilities. When creating and implementing WBLEs, teams must ensure that they are following guidelines outlined by the Fair Labor Standards Act (Riesen et al., 2019).

Research on WBLEs

Students who have paid employment experience during high school are more likely to become competitively employed after they exit the school system (Carter et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2014). Paid employment/work experiences are also correlated with positive postsecondary education and

independent living outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2021). Specific benefits of participation in WBLEs include: (a) learning about and experiencing a variety of career clusters, (b) identifying on-the-job support needs and relevant supports, (c) gaining general work experiences and developing work readiness and employability skills, (d) making connections between what students learn in the classroom and the application of those skills in an employment setting (e) developing social/communication and self-management skills and (f) building social and professional networks (Cease-Cook et al., 2015; Federal Partners in Transition [FPT], 2015; Luecking, 2020; Tucker et al, 2019). While WBLEs benefit all youth, they are particularly important for students with disabilities who may not otherwise have access to these experiences.

There are several components of WBLEs that increase their effectiveness. WBLEs that are individualized for each student are more likely to facilitate positive postsecondary outcomes (Riesen et al., 2019). These WBLEs should be planned in tandem with course instruction and based on transition assessment data (Cease-Cook et al., 2015). WBLEs should have clearly defined program goals and provide a wide array of different experiences for participants. It is also important that all team members and participants (e.g., teachers, para-professionals, employers, youth participants) have clearly defined roles and expectations within the WBLE (FPT, 2015; Luecking, 2020).

The relevance of the WBLE to the specific work site is also important. WBLEs are more likely to be effective if they relate to the specific needs of potential worksites and ways that students can meet the worksite needs. Matching WBLEs to employer needs may result in a more reciprocal relationship

and strengthen potential partnerships (Whittenburg et al., 2019). School teams should seek feedback from employers and youth participants on an on-going basis in order to make improvements to existing programs (Luecking, 2020).

Guidelines for Practice

Educators and other service providers face challenges when planning or implementing WBLEs such as finding a balance between time at the work site and time in the classroom, planning and identifying community partnerships, gaining stakeholder support, and obtaining adequate resources to carry out WBLEs (e.g., staff, transportation, and funds; Luecking, 2020; Rooney-Kron & Dymond, 2021b). Guidelines for practice provided in Table 2 may help educators and other service providers overcome these barriers.

Table 2

Guidelines for Practice

Guideline	Rationale
Identify Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies or personnel connected with your school	VR counselors have specific expertise in the area of employment as well as funds that must be allocated for this purpose. Connecting with these professionals can help school teams obtain additional resources as well as make connections in the community. Dividing responsibilities between team members can also help to combat issues with finding time to plan and implement WBLEs.
Connect with local businesses or organizations in the community	Engage with local businesses and other potential employers to identify specific needs that companies may have. By presenting the ways in which your students can meet the existing needs of businesses, they may be more willing to host students in WBLEs.
Gather meaningful transition assessment data on each student	It is important to gather on-going transition assessment data to identify students' strengths, needs, and interests. A good match between the student and job placement can assist in the success and sustainability of the WBLE.
Review Fair Labor Standards Act guidelines	When creating and implementing WBLEs, teams must adhere to all guidelines under Fair Labor Standards Act. Check out the Additional Resources section of this research brief for more information on these guidelines.

Additional Resources

Department of Education Work-Based Learning Toolkit

cte.ed.gov/wbltoolkit/

Transition Coalition Work-Based Learning 101

transitioncoalition.org/blog/wbl-introduction/

Fair Labor Standards Act Fact Sheets

webapps.dol.gov/elaws/whd/flsa/scope/ee15astw.asp

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