

**M**s. Jenkins and Ms. Cash teach high school students with moderate and severe disabilities. When they first started teaching they developed a variety of in-school work experiences to help their students learn job skills. Although both teachers felt students benefitted from the experiences, they knew that without community-based work experiences, their students would be less likely to achieve post-school employment. They decided to work together to remedy this problem.

The teachers began by thinking about their students' skills, interests, and needs. They also thought about the resources they needed to provide work experiences in the community and whether those resources were available or could be easily acquired. They synthesized this information (see Table 1) to clarify the key factors they needed to consider when identifying potential businesses for work experiences and the criteria they would use to determine which businesses they contacted.

Having clarified the factors and criteria they needed to consider, Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Cash used 3 strategies to identify potential business partners. These included identifying businesses they currently visited during community-based instruction, searching the internet for businesses that had jobs of particular interest to students, and networking with members of the community. Once businesses were identified, they ranked the businesses according to how well they met the criteria they had established for selecting businesses (see Table 1).

Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Cash contacted the businesses they ranked highest to determine whether the employer might be interested in serving as a work experience site. They found that sending the employer an email providing a basic description of the program, information about their students' abilities, and how the partnership might be mutually beneficial was effective in sparking the employer's interest and getting a response. Once a response was given, the teachers

**Table 1**

*Factors and Criteria for Selecting Potential Business Partners*

Factor	Criteria	Rationale
Location	The business had to be within walking distance from the school.	The school did not have resources to provide daily transportation.
Student abilities	The business had to have an array of tasks available that matched students' abilities.	Many jobs require adequate reading and math skills; however, most of Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Cash's students were not proficient in those areas.
Student's interest and preferences	The tasks performed had to be meaningful and of interest to the students.	Some students had limited interests and work experiences.
Staff support	There needed to be enough staff support in place in the community so that students could actively participate at all times.	All students required support to participate in work experiences at school.

**Table 2***Concerns and How They Were Addressed*

Concern	How Concerns Were Addressed
Amount of support students would require	Reassured the employer that school staff would be responsible for providing supports and that students would be supervised by school staff at all times.
Liability	Explained to the employer that they would not be liable for students and promised to have all forms related to liability completed prior to the student's first day at the business.
How co-workers might respond to working with someone with a disability	Offered to provide a brief orientation about the student's disabilities. Encouraged co-workers to have open conversations with the teachers when they had questions or concerns about the student's work performance or interactions.

immediately set up a face-to-face meeting with the employer. During the meeting, Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Cash provided a more in-depth explanation of the program, highlighted students' abilities, and described how the partnership may be mutually beneficial. They also found it helpful to ask employers what concerns they had and address those during the meeting. Table 2 describes some of the employers' concerns and how those concerns were addressed.

Identifying and initiating partnerships with businesses takes time and planning. Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Cash were responsible for teaching five classes and allotted two planning periods. A majority of their planning time each day was spent collaborating with staff, planning instruction, and attending IEP meetings. This left little time to identify and initiate partnerships with businesses. The teachers knew that to establish multiple worksites in the community they would have to put in extra time before and after school, during lunch breaks, and during their planning time. They offer the following tips for teachers who want to develop community-based work experiences for their students:

- Work with a team (i.e., other special education teachers looking to provide community-based work experience for their students). This is a big undertaking!

- Focus on establishing one good partnership and build from there. It's important to know that this doesn't happen overnight.
- When first contacting a business, propose some specific jobs that students could do so that employers can visualize what a partnership entails.
- Be prepared to explain how the partnership might benefit the employer, especially if they've never hosted students in that capacity before.
- When initially approaching businesses remember that they want to include people with disabilities, and most will be genuinely excited about the potential value students can bring.

To date, Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Cash have successfully established four long-term partnerships with local businesses. These partnerships include a recreation center, animal shelter, assisted living center, and thrift store. Their approach to identifying and selecting businesses resulted in the creation of meaningful community-based work experiences in which their students could work towards meeting their post-school employment goals.

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