

Ms. Schmidt, Ms. McDonald, and Mr. Brown teach high school students with moderate and severe disabilities. The focus of instruction is functional academics, independent living skills, and vocational preparation. Historically, students were provided with various work-based learning experiences in the community to support them in preparing for employment. Due to the pandemic, these work-based learning experiences were not available to students because businesses were forced to close. Although the teachers could not control the opening and closing of businesses, they were still responsible for preparing their students for employment.

To respond to this challenge, the teachers decided to create a school-based enterprise. Their goal was to develop a small in-school business that would provide opportunities for their students to engage in meaningful, hands-on work experiences related to the creation, organization, and management of the business. As the

teachers began to think about potential businesses that could be developed, they created a list of factors and criteria they needed to consider when choosing a business that would provide strong work experiences for their students (see Table 1).

Having clarified the factors and criteria they needed to consider, Ms. Schmidt, Ms. McDonald, and Mr. Brown reviewed their students' vocational assessments and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and made a list of each student's interests. When they reviewed the lists they noticed that more than half of the students had an interest in animals. The teachers then brainstormed possible businesses that could be created with an animal theme. One idea emerged that aligned with the students' interests and met all of the teachers' criteria - making and selling dog treats. Table 2 describes the major activities the teachers engaged in to develop the dog treat business.

Table 1

Factors and Criteria for Selecting a School-Based Enterprise

Factors	Criteria	Rationale
Student interests and preferences	The tasks performed had to be meaningful and of interest to students	Some students had limited interests and work experiences
Student abilities	The business had to include an array of tasks that matched students' abilities as well as challenged them to improve areas of weakness.	Students had various skills and abilities with some more advanced than others.
Connection to curriculum	The business needed to require knowledge and skills that linked to each student's curriculum.	The teachers wanted a business that would allow them to embed instruction on core academic content, therapy goals, vocational skills, and independent/daily living skills.
COVID safety guidelines	The business had to provide goods or services that would not expose the students, staff, or members of the community to the COVID virus.	Some students were mask exempt (i.e., unable to tolerate wearing masks for long durations of time).

The teachers operated the business during the students' existing workplace readiness class. This class was scheduled for two periods a day five days per week. Since this time was already designed to teach students workplace readiness skills and was embedded within the student's schedule, no adjustments to the curriculum or schedules needed to be made. During this time, students were given tasks within the business that aligned with their IEP goals. For

example, one student's IEP goal was to be able to perform two step tasks with no more than two verbal prompts. To help the student achieve this goal, the student completed two-step tasks within the business, such as putting dog treats in the package and then sealing the package. Embedding IEP goals within the natural activities of the business helped teachers to maximize instructional time.

Table 2

Activities for Creating a Dog Treat School-Based Enterprise

Activities	Description
Gain Approval	Met with administrators to gain approval for starting a school-based enterprise.
Identify funding	Raised funds to start the business using various strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Used classroom funds for groceries, since cooking is part of the curriculum and the business involves cooking. ▪ Designed and sold t-shirts for a Spread the Word to End the Word campaign. ▪ Applied for grants from educational foundations such as the Parent Teacher Organization and other local community organizations. ▪ Reached out to families and private donors to help fund equipment and items needed to run the business. ▪ Used school building funds to purchase equipment such as label makers, scales, and packaging
Gain classroom staff buy-in	Elicited staff input by asking them to assist with identifying recipes and making sample dog treats until they found recipes they thought were simple, streamlined, and would be profitable.
Test product	Identified two recipes they thought would be manageable for students to produce. Made small batches and gave away free samples in the teacher's workroom. Asked teachers for feedback through Google Forms and tweaked the recipe as a result.
Meet with school treasurer	Met with the school treasurer to learn how to fill out purchase orders, make deposits, set up taxes, fill out monthly tax reporting papers, and properly run the business
Purchase equipment	Purchased dog bone-shaped cookie cutters, packaging, and ingredients. The school already had a cooking lab, so teachers had access to a stove and refrigerator along with bowls, measuring cups/spoons, cookie sheets, parchment paper, and rolling pins.
Set students up for success	Matched students with jobs that aligned with their interests and strengths. For example, students who liked repetition counted and packaged dog bones, and students who enjoyed cooking used picture modified recipes and cut out the dog bones.
Create a logo	Asked graphics design teacher to help design a logo for the business. Used the logo on shirts, packages, signage, the website, flyers, etc.
Create a website	Used squareup (squareup.com/us/en/online-store) to create a website for the business. Linked the district tax ID number and banking information (with district permission) to the square account.

Starting a school-based enterprise takes time and planning. Ms. Schmidt, Ms. McDonald, and Mr. Brown were not business majors. They knew that they would need outside help figuring out how to correctly manage the finances and market their products so that the business could thrive. They offer the following tips for teachers who want to develop a dog treat business for their students:

- **Don't undervalue your business.** “We really struggled with what to price our products. We knew that ultimately it was for our students to gain experience and generalize the skills we taught in the classroom. So at first, we wanted to charge only a few dollars per 8-ounce bag. After realizing the amount of time that one 8-oz bag yielded we decided that \$10 was a better price point. This made us nervous but no one has ever questioned our price point and at the events we have attended we have sold many products each time.”
- **Find creative ways to sell your products.** “Our first full-fledged event was run by our community art class and was called Puppypalooza. We had a free booth and signed up to sell our products for a full day. We had three shifts of students attend and volunteer to help us run the event. We borrowed other staff members' tables, chairs, tent, cooler, and money box to run the event.”
- **Make a lot of products and have time set in your daily schedule to make the products.** “At events, we typically sell out of product so we try and make as many products as possible.

We found it was easiest to set up specific times and days for baking goods. For example every Monday we bought ingredients and made dough. Tuesdays we cut out dog bones from the dough and



began cooking them. Wednesdays or Thursdays we packaged bones and stored them. We checked our website for orders daily and filled them within 1-2 school days.”

- **Get press for your business.** “We reached out to our district public relations person about our business. She ran a story in our districtwide email and newsletter. We developed an Instagram page to further promote events. We presented at Board of Education meetings. We asked parents and friends to spread the word about our business on Facebook. Eventually, we had the local newspaper come out and interview us and run an article about our business.”

To date, the teachers and students have successfully been in the dog treat business for over a year. They believe their business will continue to grow as they build their base of customers. More importantly, the teachers feel the business has helped them to provide meaningful work-based learning experiences for their students at a time when access to the community has been limited. These experiences have helped students expand their job skills while working towards post-school employment

Additional Resources

School-Based Enterprise Research Brief
ictw.illinois.edu/resources/research-briefs/other-topics/brief-school-based-enterprises

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

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