

Center for Transition and Career Innovation University of Maryland



Work-Based Learning Experiences in *Way2Work Maryland*

Students with disabilities lag behind their nondisabled peers in terms of securing employment and/or enrolling in post-secondary programs after school exit. One evidence-based practice to prepare youth for careers is to offer work-based learning experiences (WBLEs), particularly when they are provided in integrated community settings. The recently enacted federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 reflects growing interest in work-based learning as an effective career intervention for youth. WIOA requires State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies to spend 15 percent of their funds on pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS), and WBLEs are one of the authorized pre-ETS, along with a) job exploration counseling; b) postsecondary counseling and opportunities; c) job readiness training; and d) self-advocacy skills.

One model demonstration program rigorously designed to evaluate the post-school outcomes of participation in work-based learning experiences for high school students with disabilities is *Way2Work Maryland*.

Work-based learning experiences offer an opportunity for students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for vocational rehabilitation services, to access career development experiences in the community.

Funded by a federal grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, *Way2Work MD* is a partnership between the Maryland State Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), the Center for Transition and Career Innovation (CTCI) at the University of Maryland (UMD), and local education agencies (LEAs) which

implement the model. *Way2Work MD* is a randomized controlled trial, with 399 total enrollment; 200 students randomized to the intervention and 199 to control or usual services. This *Brief* presents interim results of the first cohort of exiting students, and practical recommendations for the field.

A benefit of a work-based learning experience is to trying out a job or career that matches a student's interests and goals.

Rose has always loved animals. Dogs, cats, horses, sheep—she loves them all. So, when she met her employment specialist, Walter Graden from Humanim, there was no question about what field to place her in. He connected her with a volunteer job at Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding School in Street, Md.

Even though Rose had never worked in a stable, she quickly became one of the school's top volunteers. "She comes in and gets right to work," says Kathleen Schmitt, executive director and founder of CTCI. "She always has a smile on her face." Rose has achieved proficiency in grooming and feeding the horses, mucking stalls, and performing general barn duties. She also does "walk alongs" with the assistance of a staff person, when students at the school are riding.

When Rose completes this work-based learning experience, she will be qualified to work as a trainee at a horse farm anywhere. Lisa, her mom and biggest advocate, says, "I want her to keep coming here even if she gets another job. It's been such a great experience for her," adding, "We are not horse people. She would never have gotten this opportunity without Way2Work."

Way2Work Maryland Model

Way2Work MD is a career-based transition intervention for students with IEPs or Section 504 plans who are two years prior to school exit. The intervention incorporates four key components: (a) early referral to vocational rehabilitation for pre-ETS authorization; b) career planning and goal development; (c) a minimum of two unpaid work experiences, with at least one paid work experience in integrated community settings; and (d) strategic coordination of services across multiple agencies involved in youth transition.

The model features a collaborative approach, where pre-ETS services are coordinated by the local school district or LEA, which identifies and convenes a local inter-agency team, called Maryland Interagency Teams or MIATs, of LEA staff, VR counselors, and community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) to work together on achieving project outcomes. LEAs enroll students, conduct a career assessment, and refer them to DORS for pre-ETS service authorization. Once students are determined eligible for pre-ETS, and subsequent to a career assessment, they are “matched” with local CRPs, based on student choice, geographic location, and individual career profiles.

CRPs are enlisted to partner with LEA and DORS staff on implementing WBLEs in community-based settings. The providers, authorized as vendors by DORS, receive fee for service payments for this work. In addition, CRPs can request WBLE stipends from DORS, and then distribute these to students as minimum wage earnings for their work-based learning experience.

We monitor the fidelity of the implementation of the Way2Work Maryland model in several ways. First, all of the designated LEAs collect and enter data on each student enrolled in their jurisdiction on each of the major program components described earlier: 1) DORS referral; 2) individualized career plan; 3) work-based learning experiences authorized by DORS, as well as others; and 4) paid employment. Reports generated by these data are reviewed by the Way2Work technical assistance consultants, as well as by project leadership. In addition, the technical assistance consultants also complete a Fidelity Checklist at each of the MIATs, a protocol that incorporates the major service elements of the intervention, and allows for elaboration on quality of implementation. So, for example, the Fidelity Checklist will elicit information on the extent to which a student’s work-based learning experience is aligned with the her career goals. Finally, we conduct semi-annual meetings of all LEA, DORS and CRP staff on Way2Work, to collectively identify challenges and opportunities, and to problem solve around issues.

Work-based Learning Experiences (WBLEs) in *Way2Work Maryland*

WBLEs offer students a time-limited opportunity to experience a task, job, or career in an integrated community setting. A work-based learning experience that is authorized by the state VR agency includes a workplace agreement with specific student learning outcomes negotiated between the employer and student, usually facilitated and monitored by the CRP who helped secure the placement. In *Way2Work MD*, high quality WBLEs are those that: a) occur in integrated business settings; b) paid by the employer; c) aligned with the student’s career interests and skills; and d) incorporate learning opportunities through monitoring and performance feedback. Generally, work-based learning experiences are four to eight weeks duration.

“Work-based learning experiences offer great opportunities for students to identify career interests and build their work skill so they are prepared for the work world after high school.”

- Larry Abramson, TA

First Cohort Results

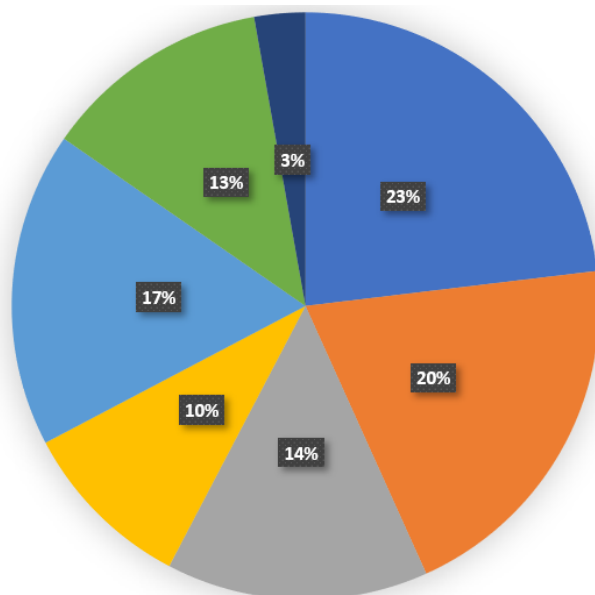
The first cohort randomized to the treatment condition included 94 students, who were two years prior to school exit with either a diploma (87%) or Certificate of Completion (10%). Of the total, 80% had an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and 17% 504 plans. Most (69%) of the students were male. In an enrollment survey, we asked students to identify their disability; with the most frequently reported category being ADHD (52%), then specific learning disability (37%) and speech impairment (29%). Students could report more than one disability.

Work-Based Learning Experience Results

Cohort 1 students who exited in June, 2019, had a total of 139 WBLEs among the 94 students; 79% of the students in cohort 1 had at least one WBLE, and 69% had two or more. The majority of the WBLEs secured by students were unpaid (88%). We also tracked whether students enrolled in *Way2Work MD* had secured a job during their enrollment: students reported 50 jobs, with 42% having at least one paid job during their enrollment.

We tracked the industry sector associated with each of the 139 WBLEs. The figure shows the industry sectors for the work-based experiences secured by the first cohort of students.

WBLEs By Industry Sector



Industry	
	Accommodation and Food Services
	Health Care and Social Assistance
	Arts, Entertainment and Recreation
	Wholesale and Retail Trade
	Educational Services, Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services
	Information, Communications, Administrative Support Services, and Public Administration
	Construction, Finance, Insurance, Waste Management and Remediation Services

Secondary School Exit Outcomes

At exit, we surveyed the LEAs in which each of the 94 students were enrolled to determine: a) high school completion (whether the student received a diploma or Certificate); b) post-secondary enrollment; and c) competitive employment at school exit. Table 1 shows the results of these three performance indicators 92 of the students actively participating in the intervention.

Outcome	High School Completion*	Post-Secondary Enrollment	Competitive Employment
Yes	89*	43	41
No	3	47	50
Unknown	0	2	1
Totals	92	92	92

*Students who are anticipated to finish with a certificate of completion at 21 years old are included as successfully graduating.

Lessons Learned

Our experience launching a multi-site work-based learning intervention offers several practical strategies useful to SVRAs, LEAs, and CRPs. *Way2Work MD* started in fall, 2017 when state vocational rehabilitation agencies were engaged in expanding their services to incorporate the new mandates of WIOA. As a result, DORS was in the initial stages of outreach, preparation, and education of LEAs and CRPs to new requirements. These recommendations will assist other states as they implement WIOA pre-ETS.

1) Service coordination through local inter-agency teams is robustly associated with high quality work-based learning experiences. Maryland Inter-agency Teams (MIATs) met monthly, under the management of a lead school personnel transition staff, and supported substantially by the CTCI technical assistance consultants. Meetings focused on monitoring student progress, problem solving challenges in securing or maintaining WBLEs, coordinating services among DORS and CRPs, and brainstorming strategies to engage students in WBLEs.

2) Availability and capacity of local community-based programs to develop, secure and support work-based learning experiences can be challenging. Many CRPs in the local implementation sites had little experience working with students, or work-based learning experiences, being traditionally oriented to working with job-seeking adults. Although DORS became more flexible in the fee structure offered to CRPs for WBLE development and implementation, we found many CRP vendors unfamiliar with how to partner with employers to develop work-based learning experiences, a sufficiently different type of activity than competitive job development, and required significant technical assistance from CTCI staff to achieve project goals.

3) Students who can most benefit from career-focused work experiences in community settings tend to be those entering their final years of secondary school. However, this is also the time when the competing demands of academics, preparing for life after high school, and extra-curricular activities

interfered with student willingness to engage in WBLEs. *Way2Work MD* staff emphasized the career-related benefits of work-based learning experiences, focusing on the learning goals and relating these to post-school success. In addition, maximizing summer months for WBLEs eased the time demands on students and families.

4) Difficulty accessing transportation to WBLEs. Under WIOA, VR agencies cannot cover transportation costs associated with students accessing WBLEs, a significant issue for rural communities. Other reports on implementation of work-based learning experiences under pre-ETS have identified this as a barrier (e.g., Fabian, Neubert, & Luecking, 2018 ; Miller, Sevak & Honeycutt, 2018), indicating a need to consider revising this federal regulation in subsequent reviews of WIOA implementation policies and procedures.

We note the benefits students experience as a result of their participation in *Way2Work MD*:

- Exiting high school with clearer career goals and options
- Leaving high school employed in a job related to their career interests
- Having stronger job and post-secondary applications due to work experience related to their potential field of interest
- Entering the real world post high school knowing their job accommodation needs and how to request them
- Applying for jobs with solid, marketable resumes and good business references

Fabian, E., Neubert, D., & Luecking, R. (2018). *State VR Agency Counselors' perceptions of their role in implementing transition services under WIOA*. Retrieved from: <https://vrpracticesandyouth.org/>

Miller, R., Sevak, P. & Honeycutt, T. (2018). *State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies' early implementation experiences with pre-employment transition services*. Retrieved from: <https://vrpracticesandyouth.org/>



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