



The Effect of Paid Employment During High School on the Acquisition of Paid Competitive Employment and Community Engagement in Adulthood: A Scale-Up Evaluation Study

Learn to Earn

The RRTC on Employment Among Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities is conducting six studies to develop effective practices to improve employment outcomes for transition-aged youth. This plain language research brief provides an update on Research Study #1.

The goal of this study is to identify the impact of supporting high school students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in accessing paid employment in high school on their post-school employment outcomes, quality of life, and community engagement and independence. A secondary goal is to develop a model for educational systems to follow that supports paid, competitive integrated employment (CIE) for students while they are still connected to the school system. This could include transition-focused classrooms or rooms for students who have completed their IEP requirements and have elected to spend the remainder of their time in school focusing on preparing for the transition to adulthood.

Study Update

Major activities in Year 2 of the study, Learn to Earn, included implementing the program with the first cohort of students and onboarding additional school divisions to partner with. The intervention includes:

- Monthly training sessions with educators.
- Bi-monthly, in-person technical assistance in community and work environments.
- Monthly informational sessions for caregivers of students enrolled in the program.
- Identification of community and adult service providers that can support employment for youth as they prepare to exit the school system and transition to adulthood.

What We Found So Far

Year 2 technical assistance allowed Learn to Earn researchers to identify key differences in how school-based transition educators and adult service employment professionals support students in integrated employment environments.

To support high school students in obtaining paid employment, it is necessary to provide training to school staff on how to provide support in work settings that model the types of supports students will receive from adult service providers, such as job coaches, in integrated employment. Additionally, supporting school systems to engage in activities that bring all partners together to support employment both during and after high school is vital. For example, if schools do not have a strong relationship with Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, then these partnerships need to be developed and fostered to support access to employment now and after the research concludes.

In sum, Year 2 of Learn to Earn enabled researchers to identify key areas where stakeholders can benefit from training and technical assistance to support and promote paid employment for high school youth with disabilities.

Next Steps

With Learn to Earn expanding in Year 3, the next steps include rolling out the program with new cohorts and school divisions.

Furthermore, Year 3 will focus on adapting the structure of Learn to Earn based on the experiences of researchers and feedback from participants and educators in Year 2. Key activities, such as person-centered employment planning meetings, were significant in helping educators, student job-seekers, caregivers, and adult service professionals, such as VR counselors, in developing a vision of employment, developing individualized and non-traditional employment goals, and engaging in activities and building relationships that could support the student in obtaining employment. Most importantly, moving towards employment for students helped research staff identify where structures and relationships that facilitate employment for transition-age youth need development.

Year 2 findings will be instrumental in Year 3 implementation and in developing a sustainable model that will ultimately provide employment opportunities for transition-age youth with disabilities who stand to benefit the most from preparing for and obtaining CIE in high school and beyond. Year 3 activities also include data analysis and comparison from key timepoints in implementation that will inform next steps.

Learn More

To learn more about this study or the other studies conducted under VCU's RRTC on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities, visit transition.vcurrtec.org.

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