



The Effect of Paid Employment During High School on the Acquisition of Competitive Integrated Employment and Community Engagement in Adulthood: A Scale-Up Evaluation Study for Youth with Autism and Related Conditions

Learn to Earn

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

The goal of Learn to Earn is to research if having a paid job during high school will improve employment outcomes, community engagement, independence, and quality of life for students with autism and related conditions after high school. In addition, we seek to understand if the type and amount of employment during high school has an impact on post-high school outcomes. Finally, we hope to develop an employment support model to help schools to provide the best transition practices possible. It is our hope that, if successful, schools across this country will be able to replicate this program to help their students with autism and related conditions gain employment or go to college after they graduate from high school.

Study Overview

Our study will research the impact of paid employment in high school on post-school employment, quality of life, and community independence and engagement for students with disabilities.

In this study, we will:

- Partner with school divisions across the state of Virginia to develop and implement high-quality transition programs.
- Research the impact of different transition programs on students with autism and related conditions.
- Provide coaching and technical assistance to the transition programs:
 - Preparing for and learning about employment.
 - Providing work-related social skills training.
 - Connecting with adult service providers.
- Compare post-school employment outcomes for students across classrooms.
- Provide training to parents and caregivers in on preparing for the transition to adulthood.

Research Questions

1. Do participants who gain competitive integrated employment in high school have better post-graduation Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) outcomes (e.g., less time in job search, higher wages, more hours, better job) than those who do not?
2. Do participants who gain CIE in high school report greater community engagement and quality of life than those who do not?
3. Does the amount of time spent in CIE result in better employment, community engagement, and quality of life outcomes among those participants who gain CIE?

Importance of the Study

Currently, post-school employment outcomes for transition-age youth with disabilities continue to lag far behind those for individuals without disabilities (Winsor et al., 2022). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) outlines strategies and guidelines for schools and adult service agencies, such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), to collaborate and work towards improving these outcomes. One method for improving outcomes is increasing work experiences and preparation for youth while enrolled in high school. In fact, research indicates that having work experiences in high school is one of the most significant predictors of post-school employment outcomes (Carter et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2015). However, it remains unclear how schools can best provide access to paid employment for high school students. Further, it is not known how much and what type of employment is necessary in order to improve outcomes (Wehman et al., 2018).

Other important variables Learn to Earn will address are the inclusion of parents and caregivers, as well as exploring the potential related benefits of accessing paid employment, to include community engagement, independence, and quality of life. In addition to paid work experience, caregiver expectations and support of employment is one of the biggest predictors of post-school employment success (Schutz et al., 2023; Wehman et al., 2015). Learn to Earn will provide monthly training and support for parents of students enrolled in the study. Additional research objectives aim to identify the impact on employment related post-school measures, such as how often and how independently youth with autism and related disabilities are engaging in their community after high school exit. Right now, statistics indicate that community access tends to dip for this age group during and after the transition to adulthood (Wehman et al., 2014). Finally, there is an indication in the research, particularly for typically developing individuals, that meaningful employment beneficially impacts quality-of-life. Learn to Earn will follow students for 12 months after exiting high school to measure potential impacts to quality of life. In sum, VCU-RRTC's Learn to Earn aims to provide a clear indication of the impact of and pathway for youth with autism and related disabilities to obtain improved post-school employment outcomes.

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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