

Plain Language Summary

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Teachers' Perspectives on Challenges to Providing Work-Based Learning Experiences for Students with Extensive Support Needs

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Background: ■ Work-Based Learning Experiences (WBLE) are educational opportunities for students to take learning beyond the classroom by participating in hands-on employment activities in real community businesses. These experiences may include job shadowing, internships, practicums, or service learning. Exposure to real work tasks in real work settings enables students to learn about their employment interests, skills, preferences, and areas where they may need some additional training and support. The purpose of a WBLE is to better prepare students for obtaining competitive work for real pay after exiting school. These opportunities can be particularly advantageous for individuals with more complex needs, such as those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Why This Study Matters: ■ While WBLEs offer a number of educational benefits to students, these types of opportunities can be difficult for educators to develop and sustain. Establishing working relationships with community employers, arranging for transportation to work sites, ensuring staffing capacity to support students during WBLEs, and receiving buy-in from key individuals, including families and administrators, are some of the challenges with setting up WBLEs. It is important to understand how educators are overcoming these obstacles to provide quality work experiences for their students.

Research Goals: ■ The purpose of this study was to examine ways in which special education teachers have been able to successfully develop WBLEs for their students, particularly students with higher support needs.

Study Design: ■ The researchers, Brenner and Dymond (2023), interviewed nine special education teachers from a Midwestern state in the United States. All teachers had taught students with disabilities (ages 14-22) for at least three years, and were actively involved in developing WBLEs.

Findings: ■ By interviewing teachers, the researchers were able to identify four ways in which they successfully approached WBLE related challenges. These were:

1. Creating authentic school-based work experiences

When going off-site was not an option, teachers worked with other departments within the school to secure real work tasks for their students to do outside of their immediate classroom. This could include completing real tasks for administrative assistants, assisting food or custodial service staff, working with transportation staff, or helping technology support units.

2. Providing direct support to students and families

Teachers worked with families to encourage their child's independence in daily activities, ensure their child came to WBLEs with appropriate clothes and hygiene, and stressed the importance of WBLEs to parents who displayed hesitancy. Teachers also worked with students prior to WBLEs on social and vocational skills, and sometimes took the students to the businesses ahead of time so they would know what to expect on their first day.

3. Building new connections

Teachers tapped into their own networks by working with friends, family, colleagues, and other existing relationships to identify potential work sites. This helped teachers identify locations and employers who they knew would be supportive of their mission.

4. Advocating for students in school and community settings.

Teachers reported that they were assertive in telling administrators about their staffing and resource needs to make WBLEs happen, and often relied on a “show-not-tell” approach by having businesses send administrators confirmation of the impact of having students working in their business.

Takeaway: ■ WBLEs are an important part of preparing students for work. While there are notable challenges to implementing WBLEs in community businesses, many teachers are finding creative solutions to overcome obstacles. It is important for teachers to share their solutions with others in the future so more students can participate in meaningful WBLEs.

Learn More: ■ <https://idd.vcurrtec.org/research/rs3.cfm>

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