

Use of a School Based Supported Employment Fidelity Scale as a Self-Assessment Tool for Secondary School Personnel*

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INTRODUCTION

Supported employment has become increasingly recognized by professionals, parents, employers and individuals with disabilities as a valuable way to provide essential support for workers with disabilities who have never worked before or who have been viewed as not having the potential to succeed (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012; Schall, Wehman, & McDonough, 2012; Wehman & Brooke, 2013). There has been an increase in supported employment in secondary schools as transition led efforts (Wehman, 2006) are calling for employment before exiting school (Certo, et al., 2008). This movement to a ‘seamless transition’ from school to adulthood requires supported employment for many of those students with more significant disabilities.

Yet, limited research exists on supported employment programs that are school based despite the effectiveness of the approach and the clear need for a meshing of transition and employment supports together for youth (Hughes & Carter, 2000). To fully understand the degree of success of these programs, it is important to focus on more complex questions such as “What are the key components of school-based supported employment programs and how are these components actually implemented?” or “What is the relationship between the implementation of specific key program components to the ultimate employment outcomes generated by supported employment?” This brief presents recent research designed to answer these questions and discusses implications for practice.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

VCU’s Rehabilitation Research & Training Center developed a School-Based Supported Employment Fidelity Scale which consists of 14 critical components rated on a five point continuum to explore the transition process and the supported employment supports available to students with disabilities in Virginia schools. The Fidelity Scale was conducted at 21 secondary schools representing urban, rural, and suburban school districts. Research staff met with special education administrators and transition teachers at each of the sites. As a result of this inquiry, reoccurring themes across the school districts were found to have implications for employment related services during the transition process. One theme that emerged was a fundamental difference in how school district staff defined supported employment when compared to the definition used by adult service agencies. Participating schools were more likely to describe their supported employment services as a hybrid model of school and community based instruction such as unpaid internships or work experiences and cooperative programs. Schools generally reported that students with disabilities, primarily students with intellectual



disabilities, did not have access to intensive job site training or ongoing supports when participating in employment related activities.

Study participants identified factors that contributed to reduced opportunities to provide supported employment services or community based experiences in general. Funding cuts were cited as having the greatest impact on the availability of transportation or transportation training for students with disabilities to be out in the community as well as opportunities for school staff to build employment related support skills. Another factor impacting the implementation of work experiences related to school schedules and the increased focus on academic instruction which resulted in limited time for students with disabilities to be in the community or for staff to work on creating work experience options with employers.

School districts emphasized their work in areas of age appropriate transition assessments and access to career exploration. Each participating school had a partnership agreement with the state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency and regularly collaborated with VR personnel, however, the level and frequency of their collaboration varied.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Participation in paid or unpaid work experiences and employment preparation programs during the transition process are by far the most frequently substantiated practices as indicated in the number of studies supporting these practices (Carter et al., 2012; Test, Massotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler, 2009; Wehman & Brooke, 2013). Findings from this study show that across Virginia school districts (rural, urban, and suburban), school personnel are experiencing challenges in providing supported employment services, and/or other types of employment related services to students with disabilities and those with intellectual disabilities in particular. Because of the critical need for students with disabilities to participate in work based learning opportunities, the results of this study generally suggest the following as schools seek ways to provide community based employment opportunities as well as supported employment services, which were the focus of this study.

1. The Importance of Exploring Opportunities

Explore opportunities to strengthen or enhance partnership agreements with vocational rehabilitation agencies (especially in light of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act - WIOA) to build supported employment options for students with more significant disabilities.

2. The Importance of Assessment & Definitions

Assess whether the definition of supported employment used in a school setting and the roles and responsibilities of personnel identified as employment specialists, are aligned with definitions used by adult agencies. This will assist in communication efforts on what specific services are provided by the school

3. The Importance of the Evidence Based Practices

Understand the evidenced based practices which are emerging in the research to guide and direct employment related practices during the transition process.

CONCLUSIONS

Employment related experiences during the transition of students with disabilities are critical. The findings from this study reveal the ongoing challenges that school district personnel face in providing work experiences in the school and community in light of reduced resources and the increasing role of providing academic instruction. The use of this fidelity scale can assist schools in their self-assessment of supported employment programs for students with disabilities in transition. Conducting this type of self-assessment of employment preparation during transition remains an important issue for further study.

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