

Employer views on school-business partnerships involving students with severe disabilities

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Although school-business partnerships are essential elements of high-quality, community-based transition experiences, little is known about the perspective of employers on their work with schools and students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

OBJECTIVE: We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 diverse businesses providing community-based work experiences to local transition students.

METHOD: We examined the perspectives and recommendations of employers regarding their partnerships with local community-based transition programs.

RESULTS: Employers identified key factors leading them to participate, described the benefits they experienced, and highlighted challenges they encountered. They also offered advice for other employers and educators pursuing similar partnerships.

CONCLUSION: We offer recommendations for future research and practice aimed at strengthening the quality and impact of school-business partnerships.

Keywords: Transition, school-to-work, collaboration, community-based, employment, intellectual and developmental disability

1. Introduction

Preparation for the world of work has long comprised a principle focus of transition education (Kohler & Field, 2003; Will, 1984). Although students might pursue multiple pathways after high school, a good job provides the foundation for so many other outcomes important to young adults with disabilities. For example, the resources and relationships that come through one's work can positively impact social connections, community inclusion, skill development, independence, and quality of

life. Indeed, current policy, research, and advocacy efforts all affirm the importance of equipping students with disabilities with the opportunities, skills, supports, and linkages needed to transition to integrated employment after high school (Antosh et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act of 2014).

For most graduates with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), life after high school remains marked by underemployment, unemployment, or segregated work experiences. Despite nearly three decades of federally mandated transition services, young adults with IDD infrequently enter the workforce in the early years after leaving high school (Butterworth, Winsor, et al., 2015; Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). For example, Carter, Austin, and

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Trainor (2012) found that only one quarter (26%) of young adults with severe disabilities were working up to two years after leaving high school; nearly half (43%) of these jobs were in segregated settings. Likewise, Butterworth and Migliore (2015) reported that fewer than 10% of young adults with IDD between the ages of 18 and 30 were accessing integrated employment in their communities.

Connecting these students to early work experiences while still enrolled in high school is advocated as one important pathway for changing these post-school trajectories (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2009; Test, Smith, & Carter, 2014). Numerous studies indicate that supporting students in community-based work experiences prior to graduation significantly increases their odds of post-high school employment (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Simonsen & Neubert, 2013; Southward & Kyzar, 2017; Wehman et al., 2015). These early work experiences provide students opportunities to identify their career interests; sample different occupational areas; learn skills and knowledge valued by employers; understand workplace norms and expectations; build their resumes; and develop a vision for future work. Community-based transition programs have emerged as a primary context through which students with IDD might access such school-sponsored work experiences (Certo et al., 2009; Gaumer, Morningstar, & Clark, 2004). These transition programs—which typically enroll students (ages 18–22) who are in their final years of public school eligibility and have more extensive support needs—place their accent on employment preparation by providing instruction and hands-on work experiences in local businesses and organizations.

The success of community-based transition programs (CBTPs) depends in part on the availability of community employers willing to partner with schools as a context for work-based learning. As emphasized by Carter, Trainor, et al. (2009), “the extent to which schools successfully draw upon the expertise, connections, and opportunities of area employers is likely to influence their capacity to deliver high-quality career development experiences for all youth, but especially youth with disabilities” (p. 146). Although best practices in transition education affirm the importance of cultivating strong partnership with employers (e.g., Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010; Wehman, 2011), little research is available to guide transition educators in developing and maintaining these

partnerships in ways that benefit their students with IDD.

The paucity of recent research on developing school-business partnerships is somewhat surprising given its prominence within current compilations of transition competencies and program quality indicators (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 2015; Morgan, Callow-Heusser, Horrocks, Hoffman, & Kupferman, 2014; Morningstar, Lee, Lattin, & Murray, 2016). Available studies suggest secondary special educators may feel poorly prepared to establish these types of collaborations (e.g., Gripentrog, 2015). Drawing upon their interviews with special educators across ten high schools, Trainor, Carter, Owens, and Swedeen (2008) highlighted a persistent disconnect between school and business communities and noted the need for more research on forming effective working relationships. In their survey of high school special educators across Illinois, Kim and Dymond (2010) found that many teachers reported having limited personal experience implementing vocational instruction for their students in the community. Special educators responsible for implementing community-based transition programs would benefit from guidance on inviting and supporting employers to participate in ongoing partnerships to provide hands-on job training for students with IDD.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perspectives and recommendations of employers regarding their partnerships with local CBTPs. Employers who have first-hand experience working with schools have a unique vantage point from which to address the factors that led them to participate, the benefits they experienced, and the challenges they encountered. We anticipated such information could provide important insights for transition educators who are responsible for establishing community-based work experiences, but who remain uncertain about how best to engage employers. Although several studies have solicited the perspectives of employers who have partnered with adult employment agencies (e.g., Fraser et al., 2010; Gustafsson, Peralta, & Danermark, 2013), the context of working with schools and students warrants particular consideration. We addressed four research questions in this qualitative study:

1. What factors led employers to collaborate with community-based transition programs serving students with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

2. What benefits do employers identify from these partnerships?
3. What challenges do employers encounter when engaging in these partnerships?
4. What recommendations do employers have for other businesses and school staff around navigating successful partnership?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Study participants included 13 managers or business owners who were partnering with CBTPs to provide work-based learning for students with IDD. All participants were White. About half were female (46%) and all were at least 30 years of age. Education level varied across participants (see Table 1). Participants worked in their current position an average of 14.9 years (range, less than 1 year to 44 years), and represented diverse occupational sectors (e.g., food service, hospitality, government; see Table 1). Participants are referred to as “employers” in the remainder of this article.

To be included in the study, employers must have had a current partnership with a CBTP affiliated with a large metropolitan school district in a southeastern state that exceeded at least one month. All employers interviewed in this study had existing partnerships that exceeded one year (see Table 1). At the time of the study, the district’s CBTPs had existing partnerships with approximately 43 different businesses who hosted community-based work experiences. We extended study invitations to 21 of these businesses. We approached these particular businesses in order to obtain a diverse sample representing different occupational sectors and to avoid involving more than two of the same business type (e.g., hospitals, hotels).

2.2. Community-based transition programs

At the time of the study, the district’s CBTPs served approximately 65 students across eight community-based classrooms. Students were identified as African American (49%), White (32%), Hispanic (9%), Asian American (6%), and other (3%). Most students were male (71%) and ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. Although most students (80%) were served under the special education category of intellectual disability, 26% were served under the category of autism, 9% under speech/language impairment, 8% under other

health impairment, 5% under visual impairment, and 3% under orthopedic impairment. (Some students had secondary disability labels.) To be served within the CBTP, students must have graduated from high school with a special education diploma. When in high school, all students had been enrolled in life skills classrooms for students with moderate to severe disabilities for some or all of their school day.

The overarching purpose of the program is to provide supervised, work-based learning experiences in a variety of settings to develop skills relevant for future employment. All vocational training was provided in community businesses under the supervision of special educators and/or paraprofessionals who served as job coaches. The structure of students’ work experiences varied within and across the seven community-based classroom program sites. For example, some programs involved students in work placements with multiple employers simultaneously, while others introduced students to placements sequentially. Most placements lasted a half- or full-semester, others spanned the entire school year. Likewise, the number of hours students spent at each job site per week ranged from 1–27 hrs ($M=4.8$ hours, $Mdn=2.0$ hours). Although all placements were established as unpaid work-based learning sites, four employers ultimately hired students as paid employees prior to or after the students exited their program.

2.3. Data collection

We requested a list of partnering businesses from teachers of each of the seven CBTPs. When extending invitations to these employers, we asked to be connected with the individuals who worked most closely with the CBTPs. One of two graduate students in special education who were interested in transition education conducted all interviews. The interviewers conducted interviews at a time and place convenient to the employer. We used a semi-structured interview protocol of 19 questions (see Table 2). The design of this study and our interview protocol took place within the context of a federally funded employment systems change project aimed at ensuring youth and young adults with IDD across our state would have the aspirations, preparation, opportunities, and supports to access integrated work in their community (Carter, McMillan, Willis, & Tennessee-Works Partnership, 2017). As a result, members of our educator and employer workgroups each provided input into our protocol. Each interview was

Table 1
Employer demographics and business information

| Pseudonym | Sex | Age | Race/ ethnicity | Years employed at the business | Occupational sector | Years of partnership with school program | Number of students with whom they have worked |
|-----------|-----|-------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| Christy | F | 60+ | W | 44 | Public media | 2 | 10 |
| Danielle | F | 50–59 | W | 24 | Education | 10–12 | 30–40 |
| Erica | F | 50–59 | W | 10 | Food service | 1 | 9 |
| Erin | F | 30–39 | W | 4 | Medical | 1.5 | 15 |
| Kristin | F | 30–39 | W | <1 | Recreation | Unknown | Unknown |
| George | M | 30–39 | W | 12 | Consumer products | Unknown | 6 |
| Greg | M | 50–59 | W | 10 | Hospitality | 1 | 8 |
| Larry | M | 30–39 | W | 15 | Public media | 4–5 | 15 |
| Lisa | F | 60+ | W | 30 | Clothing | 2 | 12–15 |
| Michelle | F | 60+ | W | 15 | Government | 4 | 20–25 |
| Mike | M | 50–59 | W | 8 | Food service | 4 | 15–20 |
| Tim | M | 50–59 | W | 7.5 | Hospitality | 4 | 25–30 |
| Tom | M | 50–59 | W | 13 | Transportation | 1.5 | 9–10 |

F = Female. M = Male. W = White.

audio recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy, and de-identified prior to analysis. Average interview length was 23 min (range, 9 to 40 min). All participants received a US\$25 gift card for their time.

2.4. Data analysis

All interviews were analyzed using NVivo 10 (2012), a qualitative data analysis program. One doctoral student and one post-doctoral student, both with expertise and experience in the field of transition education, adopted a team-based approach to coding in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of our findings (Patton, 2002). We did not anticipate that all interview questions would elicit relevant responses to our research questions. However, we reviewed full transcripts throughout the coding process to both capture emerging themes and ensure all pertinent data was included in our analysis. We used a constant comparative approach to develop a representative set of themes and categories grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). First, we reviewed each written transcript and listened to audio recordings of each interview. Second, we independently analyzed one transcript, using open coding to assign initial categories to the content directly related to our research questions. We developed an initial coding scheme through comparing and refining these open coding decisions. Third, we independently applied this coding scheme to the remaining transcripts, attending several consensus meetings throughout the process. During these meetings, we collapsed codes, added new codes based on interview content, sharpened code names and definitions, and reflected on our findings. Fourth, after all transcripts were coded we met

with a third member of the research team—a faculty member in special education—who provided peer debriefing. Feedback from his review resulted in reorganization of some coding categories and additional clarification of our definitions. Fifth, we conducted a second round of coding on each transcript, applying this updated coding scheme to confirm it was comprehensive and representative of the data. This second round of coding resulted in the addition of two new recommendations made by employers and three new codes.

During data collection and analysis, we used three strategies to support the trustworthiness of the data (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell & Poth, 2007). First, an audit trail documented both logistical data (i.e., interview dates and times) and data analysis (i.e., from all steps of coding). Second, we kept detailed records of how the coding scheme evolved over multiple rounds of coding and consensus meetings. Additionally, to inform our consensus meetings, we kept records from individual coders to compare and contrast coding decisions. Third, we reduced bias during analysis using investigator triangulation with consensus coding and the involvement of a third member who provided peer debriefing and critique.

3. Results

3.1. What factors led these businesses to collaborate with local transition programs?

Although employers shared myriad reasons for deciding to partner with a CBTP, we identified

Table 2
Employer Questions in Semi-Structured Interviews

| Questions |
|---|
| How long have you worked here? |
| How long have you been a work-based learning site for the school? |
| How many students have worked at your business through this program? |
| Have you hired any students after working at your business? |
| Tell me about how you became a site for the work-based learning program. |
| What sort of training or support did the school provide you in preparing to be a work-based learning site? |
| How prepared to be a work-based learning site did you feel when you began? |
| Tell me about the reasons you decided to become a work-based learning site. |
| Was your business previously involved in hiring individuals with disabilities? |
| Did you personally have any past experience with people with intellectual or developmental disabilities? |
| What do you think has been the biggest benefit to your business of becoming a work-based learning site? |
| What has been the biggest challenge working with the work-based program? |
| What is the best way for a teacher or a school district to approach a business like yours to become a work-based learning site for their students? |
| What does a teacher or student need to know in order to be an effective partner with our business in particular? |
| What advice would you give a business who wanted to start being a work-based learning site for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities? |
| What resources would you suggest for other employees to consult? |
| How successful do you think the collaboration between your business and school has been? |
| How much impact do you believe the partnership has had on the students who have worked for you? |
| Is there anything you didn't have the opportunity to share related to your experiences that you have had as a work-based learning site? |

four primary themes: connection to disability, social responsibility, educator outreach, and workplace attributes.

3.1.1. Connection to disability

Employers frequently mentioned their previous experiences in the community or workplaces, as well as personal relationships that motivated them to partner with CBTPs. Community experiences focused mostly on school and volunteering. For example, Kristin mentioned that in her community center, "... we have a disabilities program. And I have been able to be involved in different events and stuff with those [programs], like the Special Olympics." Larry, who worked in the public service industry, had been involved with individuals with disabilities through a church ministry. Other employers noted workplace interactions with coworkers, community members, or CBTP students at former jobs. Tom spoke about how his training as a bus operator prepared him to work with people with a variety of abilities. About half of employers indicated they (or someone else associated with their business) had a family member with a disability or a family member working as a special educator that motivated their partnership. Tim, a hotel manager stated, "My general manager, his son has a learning disability and so I'm sure there is a personal passion there to try to help opening up doors for individuals [with disabilities]."

3.1.2. Social responsibility

In addition to personal experiences and relationships, many employers cited a sense of social responsibility as a driving factor for this collaboration. Eight employers emphasized their desire to assist students in their preparation for life after high school by helping address the work and life skills needed in the next phase of life. Tim said, "I think students at that age group need to learn some type of trade ... And that's what we're trying to do here is give 'em some type of job skill so they may be able to go out and find a job working somewhere else and the confidence to be able to do it." For seven employers, their desire was to demonstrate their support for the broader community. Erin stated that their hospital, "... has a faith-based mission mindset, and so it's part of our ministry that we want to be a partner and help our community in that way." Four employers felt it was their social responsibility to create a diverse workforce reflective of the community. As a manager, Mike highlighted this value when he said, "It is enriching for the employees in terms of learning how people are different at [our business]."

For some, this diversity models something important to a watching community. Erica stressed that through their partnership the rest of the community would recognize the value and success of a diverse workforce. For one employer, the partnership also created a context for students with disabilities to serve the community. At a local hospital, students with IDD

worked in a public setting directly serving the community members by cleaning hospital rooms, serving employees and patients in the cafeteria, and organizing and delivering information packets. Altruistic motivations were a common motivator for many of these employers.

3.1.3. *Educator outreach*

For most ($n=9$) employers, it was the initiative taken by local school staff that provided an impetus for entering into a new partnership. Across many of the interviews, employers highlighted how important these educators were in inviting business engagement. For example, Erin said,

“She [the teacher] came to me . . . over the summer she came right before school was out. She actually did not have the position yet; she was in the process of interviewing for it when I met her. And . . . I think that says a lot about her and how motivated she is and how dedicated she is to this.”

In other situations, the employer already had an existing relationship with someone from the transition program or with a participating student with IDD. This familiarity provided an entry point, as illustrated by Lisa: “She [the teacher] goes to the same church. One day in church she approached me and asked if this could work. I wasn’t sure, but [the teacher] told me they would watch the kids and we would just try.” Beyond initial outreach, some teachers even set up trial periods for businesses so they could explore whether the students would be a good fit for the work environment. As Larry noted, “I literally thought we’d try the program out to see how it worked and it’s worked ever since we started.” Lisa, a manager at a second-hand clothing store, stated, “Well, I was kinda hesitant cause I didn’t think they would be able to do too much of anything, but then they got where they could hang clothes, help price things, organize, sort coat hangers, clean up different areas, and they did it with a lot of zeal, and they did it very good.”

3.1.4. *Workplace attributes*

We identified two prominent workplace features that made employers more comfortable hosting CBTPs. First, most employers indicated they had accrued extensive experience in their place of business before entering into a partnership. Their deep familiarity with required tasks, key responsibilities, and scheduling led them to feel confident introducing students into their workplace. Only two participants

were on the job for less than five years prior to engaging in a work-based learning. Tim, a veteran hotel manager expressed his knowledge of the hotel industry by saying, “It’s important that I find things for them and be ready to have them set to do things, even office tasks. We’ve looked for numerous different angles in terms of things that they can maybe learn.”

Second, employee climate, culture, and attitudes also primed partnership with a CBTP. Five employers discussed how prevailing attitudes among co-workers make their business a supportive and positive work environment. Danielle recalled, “When the [school] bus pulls up, the staff and kids are like, ‘Oh they are here!’ It is amazing when they get off the bus and give you a hug.” Danielle went on to discuss how the students played an important role in creating a positive atmosphere.

3.2. *What benefits do employers identify from these partnerships?*

We identified six themes addressing potential benefits that may come through partnering with local CBTPs.

3.2.1. *Expands productivity*

Every employer discussed the positive influence students with IDD had with regard to productivity in the work environment. However, this influence was always addressed in broad ways and without quantifying its impact. Almost everyone we interviewed specifically mentioned increased business output by having students with disabilities involved at their place of business. Larry stated, “So, productivity is definitely helped by the kids. I can’t put it into a number, but there’s definitely a benefit.” In other words, general productivity increased because extra people were present to contribute to the work. As Mike said, “They provide a lot of work hours for us that I didn’t have the power to do.” Many employers also described the students they encountered as highly motivated, which sometimes inspired other employees to step up and become more engaged. Moreover, because the students were themselves so productive, other employees found themselves freed up to tackle additional tasks throughout the workday. As Lisa stated, “The [students] are also helping the departments, maybe in terms of some of the more tedious things that maybe [other employees] don’t have the time to do.” By providing additional assistance at Lisa’s business, the students were able to

focus on time-consuming tasks that otherwise may not have been completed.

3.2.2. *Economical partnerships*

For many employers, this increased productivity came without requiring the allocation of additional resources. As Erin noted, “Unlike any other of my volunteers, these students come in with a job coach and they have someone with them. So, I know they’re going to be here when they say they’re going to be here, you know. So in terms of preparedness, I was not concerned at all because I knew that having that job coach is something that you don’t normally get.” The active and ongoing involvement of both special educators and job coaches throughout the school year served to limit the amount of training, oversight, and supervision employers had to contribute. In some cases, school staff provided training to other employees, ongoing support, and flexible scheduling that ultimately served to meet other needs within the business.

3.2.3. *Contributes to a positive atmosphere*

Many employers were able to articulate specific ways in which students positively influenced the work environment through their relationships, attitudes, and abilities. Nearly all of the employers spoke about the personal relationships that formed between the students and their co-workers. As Erin described, “I think I see it in their faces, I saw it when they came back a few weeks ago from the summer, and they all screamed and came to see me and hugged.” Her quote described the enthusiasm the students held for their job and the people with whom they worked. According to Erin, students in her partnership contribute to building a positive atmosphere. Employers also described how these new relationships inspired other employees to adopt a positive outlook. Mike, who operates a meal delivery program for seniors said, “[The students] come to work every day, they do what they’re supposed to do, and they come in with a different type of an attitude than a normal employee and that kind of rubs off on the other employees, kind of a, you know. The other employees kind of like working with them.”

A few employers also attributed the positive environment to student productivity and sensed the student output. George spoke to this theme when he shared, “They’ve been able to do [task completion] without much supervision from me. I would say they kind of impressed me there. [Their teacher] usually guides them and I’ve just stood back and

observed—and I was impressed. They’re able to comprehend and they were able to do things more than I thought possible.” A few employers felt the presence of students alleviated some of the stress felt by other employees, which served to further enhance the work environment. When asked what benefits students provide to increase productivity, Larry stated, “And, again, it’s not just a numbers benefit, it’s a mental emotional benefit also for not only the kids but some of my employees as well.” Larry went on to explain that the students provided a lighter load to his employees and thereby creating less stress in his employees.

3.2.4. *Provides a hiring pipeline*

Employers tend to highly value motivated employees who develop positive co-worker relationships. That many students with IDD were identified as possessing these qualities made these school-business partnerships a potential hiring pipeline for employers. Employers noted that the opportunities they had to observe students on the job over time led them to consider some students for future employment. The few students with IDD who were hired after their involvement in the program were described as coming with a demonstrated ability to work well at the business and get along with coworkers. Employers also felt they required less training. As Tim noted:

“You know, there are certain positions in a hotel entry level that they can come into. And that’s always been kind of our goal, to try and see if they’re capable of handling the job, per se, working maybe in the food and beverage, or working in the laundry. Those are typically entry level jobs that people get into.”

3.2.5. *Creates educational opportunities*

Several employers addressed the opportunities these partnerships provided for all of their employees to learn more about the value of diversity within their business. Specifically, they felt that the presence of students with IDD in the workplace promoted both knowledge about and acceptance of people with disabilities. Tim illustrated this point by saying, “Well, I think its enriching for not only the kids, it’s enriching for the employees in terms of learning how people are different.” Another employer, Kristin, said, “I think it’s good to open their eyes to see that . . . just because somebody is different doesn’t mean they’re not capable of doing everyday chores or everyday jobs.”

3.2.6. *Expands networks*

Although less common, some employers identified the ways in which their partnership helped them build valuable personal and professional contacts. For example, two employers emphasized the value of connecting with other professionals in their community. As Tim noted, “It’s been rewarding for me now because not only does it give [other employers] maybe insight into what they’re capable of in terms of doing and achieving, it opens doors for me terms of personal relationships—network and business-wise—meeting a lot of different people that had we not gone down that path, wouldn’t be there.”

3.3. *What challenges do employers encounter when partnering with transition programs?*

We identified four main themes addressing the challenges employers reported experiencing.

3.3.1. *Program organization*

Most challenges noted by employers related to the structure of the school’s transition program. For example, having multiple students with IDD present at one time could be difficult due to both space constraints and job roles at the business. Danielle spoke on space limitations when she said, “And, and I think it is difficult sometimes when we’re in a smaller enclosed space, when they come for their visit and we are in a situation where we’re maybe in the gym because it’s raining outside.” Similarly, Tim commented on task availability by saying, “There’s just so many jobs in one area. We can’t have four students in the kitchen when there are only jobs for two.” Other employers found it somewhat difficult to assess the strengths and weakness of the students involved at their business. Poor assessment sometimes meant teachers and employers had difficulties matching students with the appropriate job. Similarly, employers commented on the wide range in students’ abilities.

3.3.2. *Time investment*

Although many employers indicated the CBTP partnerships required few resources, we found that time investment was a significant challenge early on in the partnerships. This was typically due to the length of time needed to learn about each students’ individual strengths and interests. Larry exemplified this by saying, “I think it’s just more working with each kid and finding kinda what works for them and how you can work with them.” Michelle also described an “awkward period.” She stated, “It was

awkward for all of us, because, you know, we didn’t know what to expect and what would happen with the kids and stuff. But, as they would come and we’d get to know the kids and stuff like that, it got more comfortable.” Some employers spoke about the particular demands the partnership made both on resources and on their attention.

Two employers were more concerned with the existing employees, and had to devote time to training them on diversity and inclusion. Erin stated, “I think the challenge absolutely is in educating our staff and finding staff who are willing to allow that in their departments and to explain to them, again, with the job coaching thing how actually they may be coming out on top in this.” At the time of the interview, Erin worked in the medical industry and managed volunteers in all departments. She stressed the challenge of training the different departments in her field.

3.3.3. *Setting expectations*

Prior to entering a partnership with the community-based transition program, some employers held specific concerns related to expectations. Liability concerns were raised by three employers. For example, Tim said, “Well, I can tell you when we were approached with the opportunity, there was some concerns from our board of directors about liability issues.” Another employer, Greg, wanted a business-wide collaboration with one of the local programs, but cited concerns among upper management regarding liability.

Greg also spoke on his staff concerns. He noted, “We were concerned initially that there could be issues and that there might be concerns that ‘These people are gonna be taking my job’ or ‘My job’s gonna be eliminated [by the students].’” Others were candid about their concerns related to the abilities of students and their expectations. Several employers noted that employees and management were initially uncertain about the strengths and behavior of students with IDD. These participants noted that unpredictable behaviors could affect the workplace in a negative manner. However, none of the participants gave an example of an actual occurrence. Rather, these were concerns prior to engaging in a partnership.

3.3.4. *Communication*

One challenge faced by two employers related to communication with the school’s transition program. Each referenced the need for additional—and much more frequent—communication from teachers and job coaches. Tim said, “There’s been some things in

terms of challenges at times. I think the biggest thing is communication. You have to fully communicate and see where the understanding is." Michelle, who works for a state government agency, felt the transition staff could be clearer when scheduling visits. Michelle said, "They always will either email me or call me and tell me, 'we're coming, you know, we're gonna be there in 30 minutes,' or something like that, usually they do. Here lately they didn't this year, but usually they do." Although communication was not identified as a challenge for a most employers, many did highlight the importance of open and ongoing communication in their school-business partnerships.

3.4. What recommendations do employers have for other businesses and school staff around navigating successful partnership?

Throughout the interviews, employers offered a number of recommendations related to engaging in a new school-business partnership (see Table 3 for a summary). Some of these recommendations were aimed directly at schools and addressed practices related to setting clear expectations, articulating the benefits of potential partnerships, individualizing experiences for students, and providing on-the-job supports. Other recommendations were relevant for other businesses and addressed practices related to maintaining ongoing communication, beginning with a trial period, communicating their appreciation to students, and adopting a flexible posture.

4. Discussion

Effective partnerships between CBTPs and local employers are essential to ensuring students with IDD access hands-on experiences that will prepare them well for the world of work. Although prior work has highlighted the importance of these partnerships within prevailing transition frameworks or addressed particular practices needed to enhance employment outcomes (e.g., Gilson, Carter, & Biggs, 2017; Kohler & Field, 2003; Test et al., 2009), limited empirical attention has focused on employer's perspectives on these critical school-business partnerships with schools. We asked 13 employers to address the factors that led them to pursue partnerships, the benefits they accrued as a result, the concerns they held, and the recommendations they have for others. Our findings extend the literature on the transition to employment in several important ways.

First, the perspectives of employers highlight influential factors that might spur the development of new school-business partnerships including educator outreach, personal connections to disability, social responsibility, and workplace suitability. Our data indicate some business owners might be more inclined to host a CBTP based on altruism while others were led by their connections in the community or to individuals with disabilities. We also identified practical considerations to explore, including the work history of supervisory staff and the company culture. Taking time to discern employer motivations in addition to other commonly weighed characteristics such as location, industry, and work tasks might create stronger employer interest in hosting a CBTP. Given the low employment rate of students with IDD after graduation and research support for early work experiences (Carter et al., 2012), it is essential for educators to strategize how they might approach, secure, and maintain partnerships with local employers. By understanding employer motivations, educators are better prepared to tailor their outreach and marketing approaches to highlight factors that might be more compelling for a business.

Second, this study provided new insights into the potential benefits of CBTPs. Although past studies demonstrate the importance of work-based learning as part of a high-quality transition program because of its benefit to students (Gilson et al., 2017; Mazzotti et al., 2016), we identified additional benefits to both business owners and their employees. We expected some employers to see students as assets who positively impacted their businesses culture or productivity, we were surprised when some employers described CBTPs as a potential pathway for finding future employees. Through the structure of the CBTP, employers were able to observe students on-the-job and evaluate their fit within the organization. Students were also well-trained in tasks and responsibilities of the job, reducing training time associated with hiring. As a result, four employers hired students directly from the CBTP. Whether working as employees or building skills as part of their work-based learning program, employers found that the presence of people with disabilities helped expand their workforce diversity and led to both increased disability awareness and expectations of people with disabilities in the workplace. Furthermore, they shared that the relationships forged between students and employees as well as the positive student attitudes contributed to a positive work environment.

Table 3
Recommendations of employers for schools and other businesses

| Recommendations for schools | |
|---|--|
| Set expectations | Meet with employers to define expectations and address concerns prior to beginning a partnership |
| Establish connections with leadership | Discuss opportunities with human resource directors, supervisors, and business owners; and be persistent |
| Explain benefits to employers | Highlight company-specific benefits that might result from a partnership |
| Provide job supports | Classroom staff and job coaches should be available to support students at the worksite |
| Communicate regularly | Have open and ongoing dialogue before, during, and after a partnership is established |
| Know local businesses | Be familiar with business industries, trends, and needs before approaching employers about beginning a partnership |
| Know student strengths | Conduct ongoing assessments with students and share their strengths, interests, and abilities with employers |
| Recommendations for other businesses | |
| Connect with other school-business partnerships | Observe and learn about the benefits of partnering with local transition programs from experienced employers |
| Secure staff buy-in | Before beginning a partnership, be sure to thoroughly explain the program to current employees and address lingering concerns. |
| Approach students as individuals | Spend time with students to learn about their individual strengths, personalities and goals |
| Allocate appropriate tasks | Provide students with tasks that fit their abilities but also challenge them to build new skills |
| Implement a trial period | If you're unsure about beginning a partnership, organize a trial period to see if the program meets your business needs |
| Demonstrate appreciation of students | Let students know their value and ensure they are treated with respect by coworkers and supervisors |
| Maintain flexibility | Work with schools to understand their work calendar and what events might impact student attendance |

Third, we found that many of the challenges and benefits employers shared were interwoven. For example, most employers described CBTP partnerships as requiring little oversight and resources, while some mentioned the initial time investment to learn about students' strengths, assign appropriate work tasks, and streamline scheduling and logistics. Moreover, employers seemed to experience mixed feelings from existing employees—some employers celebrated the relationships they developed with students, others mentioned the reluctance employees had about training and working alongside students with disabilities. Two employers even had employees that feared being replaced by student workers. These divergent perspectives across and within employers emphasize the importance of educators examining the industry, business needs, and workplace culture of businesses to assess if their programs will be “a good fit” for the employer. Employers echoed this idea, highlighting the importance of communication at the onset of a partnership to discuss expectations, logistics, and responsibilities. Although the flip side of some challenges were benefits, others stood out as potential roadblocks to partnership (e.g., liability concerns, student skillsets not aligning with business

needs, and difficulty accommodating a large number of student workers simultaneously).

4.1. *Implications for practice*

In addition to the recommendations described in Table 3, we highlight additional implications emerging from this study. First, teachers were identified as the primary school staff member to initiate these school-business partnerships. Indeed, employers were consistent in their recommendation that teachers should engage in discussions with leaders or upper management of local businesses. When engaging with businesses, participants recommended teachers communicate benefits of a partnership and set expectations from the outset. Unfortunately, research suggests many teachers lack the confidence or training needed to establish effective community-based partnerships (Li, Bassett, & Hutchinson, 2009; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Transition teachers may benefit from accessing professional development focused on this aspect of transition services. Likewise, university programs may need to address competencies related to school-business partnerships more deeply as part of pre-service training.

Second, employers held varied perspectives on what a strong partnership might look like. Although each partnership appeared similar on the surface, employers expressed differing views on preferred characteristics related to school staff involvement, the role of coworkers, and expectations for students. For example, some employers expressed a need for job coaching early on with support from existing coworkers; others felt school staff should take on “full responsibility” for training and supporting student workers. When selecting jobs for students, some employers chose tasks that challenged students based on their abilities and interests; others identified more consistent tasks they felt students could accomplish independently. Partnerships also varied in the number of students who participated and their weekly work schedule. These differences point to the importance of having early discussions to clarify and set expectations. Each partnership should be defined based on both the specific business needs of each employer and the educational needs of participating students.

Third, although employers were open to collaborating with schools, few partnerships resulted in paid employment—even at businesses that had hosted student workers for successive years. Some employers reported these partnerships provided opportunities to observe and hire students who were well-trained and familiar with their workplace culture. Further, students experienced numerous benefits from engaging in community-based work experiences including developing soft skills, career exploration, identifying strengths and interests, and building personal relationships. However, schools must balance these benefits with the potential for future employment. By talking with employers at the outset about the program goals, it may be possible to set more defined pathways for students to achieve paid employment. Additionally, student placements might be driven by a student’s years to graduation, proximity to the workplace, or transition goals outlined in their individualized education plan (IEP).

4.2. *Limitations and future research*

Several limitations of this study suggest possibilities for future research. First, this study involved a relatively small number of employers from a single metropolitan area. Although participants represented diverse industry sectors, the experiences of employers may look different in other districts that adopt distinct approaches to transition programming. Future research involving participants from

other regions is needed to examine how perspectives related to the influences on business-school partnerships might diverge from those in our sample. Second, employers were interviewed at only one point in time. Future research involving sustained engagement would enable exploration of whether and how school-business relationships grow, deepen, and dissolve over time. Third, the scope of perspectives involved in this study was limited. Future research should consider how to broaden the scope of included perspectives to include supporting school staff, other co-workers, and students themselves. A broadening of voices would deepen the portrait of these important, but multifaceted, partnerships. Fourth, the employers regularly referenced the positive impact of involving transition-age students with disabilities at their workplace, but did not point to specific data on how business productivity or output was enhanced. This perspective was intriguing, but requires further exploration. We encourage future researchers to consider whether there really is a “business case” to be made for these school-business partnerships and to collect data that would support such an assertion of tangible benefits.

5. Conclusion

Early work experiences are a powerful pathway for improving transition outcomes among young people with IDD. We explored factors leading to school-business partnerships, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with those experiences. In general, employers viewed these partnerships quite positively—both for the students involved and for their business. Moreover, their perspectives provide valuable insights for transition educators charged with preparing their students well for the world of work. Our findings highlight a critical stakeholder voice so often overlooked in conversations about high-quality transition education. Moreover, they affirm the importance of stewarding these valuable relationships well in an effort to enhance the quality of transition services for young adults with severe disabilities.

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Conflict of interest

None to report.

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