

Going to Work!



New Brunswick
Association For
Community Living

Association du
Nouveau-Brunswick
pour l'intégration
communautaire

**Facilitating Successful Transitions from School to
Employment for Youth with an Intellectual Disability**

Components of Effective Practice for New Brunswick Schools



Introduction

Making the transition from school to adult life can be challenging for many young people including for youth with an intellectual disability. While many young people will attend college or university after high school, many others will try to enter the labour force following graduation.¹ Without adequate planning and preparation the transition from school to employment can be even more challenging. For young people with an intellectual disability, planning and preparation for work can mean the difference between becoming active job seekers and workers in their communities and sitting at home with few or no prospects for employment.

For the past several years, NACL has been working in partnership with school districts, high schools, families, students and employment agencies to test new ways of supporting successful transitions for youth with an intellectual disability. Through this process many important strategies and practices have been identified and tested. In addition, research on ‘best practices’ in

other jurisdictions has helped inform current thinking about how we can better support young people with an intellectual disability to become more confident about themselves and their abilities, and to be ready to enter the world of employment.

This guide offers information on strategies and practices that have been found to be effective in helping to prepare youth make a successful transition to employment. It starts with strategies for promoting self determination and then focuses on the importance of effective planning for each student, career exploration, preparing young people for employment, building partnerships with community employers and employment agencies, and lastly exploring the critical role of work based learning for students with an intellectual disability.

1. While this publication focuses on the transition to employment for youth with an intellectual disability, the transition to post secondary education and training is equally important for many youth. Increasingly, youth with an intellectual disability are tapping into opportunities to attend post secondary education, particularly at community college. These opportunities must also expand in order to provide people with access to employment skills training for today's labour market.



Component 1: Fostering Self Determination

“Promoting the self-determination of children and youth with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities has implications across the lifespan and across life domains. Though most interventions have been developed and validated with middle and high school students, promoting the outcome that students leave school as self-determined young people is a lifelong focus for families and educators.”

(Michael Wehmeyer, “Promoting Self Determination in Students with Developmental Disabilities”, in *What Works Well for Special Needs Learners*, K. Harris and S. Graham, editors, 2007)

Michael Wehmeyer refers to self-determination as “volitional actions, where “volition” refers to making conscious *choices* or the power or will to make conscious choices.” Self-determination and the skills required for making and acting on one’s own choices is important to the successful



employment of youth with disabilities. As Wehmeyer notes, the development of self determination should be a lifelong focus that involves both families and the school system. If this has not been the case for youth preparing to make the transition from school to employment, then specific efforts are required to begin to develop this capacity.

There are a number of strategies that can help to foster self determination in children and youth with an intellectual disability.

- (a) *Imbed decision making within curriculum learning for youth.* This requires an intentional focus within educational planning to identify on-going opportunities for young people with an intellectual disability to develop decision making skills.
- (b) *Encourage families to encourage and support decision making within the home environment.* Families have an important role to play in helping their children learn about making choices and decisions. An education plan that supports the learning of these skills can be supplemented by home and community opportunities. For example, families can use simple strategies that encourage their children to make decisions about what to wear, eat, purchase with their own money, and do in their spare time.
- (c) *Engage in “student-directed learning”.* Within student-directed learning students are active participants in the instructional process and to the extent possible, responsible for setting and attaining their educational goals. Students choose learning goals and tasks and are encouraged to review and adjust their goals during each school year.

(d) *Support students to develop self advocacy skills.* Self advocacy involves learning to “speak” for oneself and develop some assertiveness abilities. NBACL has developed a self advocacy on-line resource (called Opportunity Link) that is designed for people who have a disability who want to learn about making decisions and speaking up for themselves. It is a voice and print based program that reviews a number of aspects of decision making and self advocacy, including:

- What self advocacy is all about and why it is important
- What it means to make decisions for ourselves
- The different types of decisions we make
- What rights we have (particularly as adults)
- Ways that people can speak up for themselves

This program is designed for people with disabilities to use on their own or with some help, if necessary. It prompts people to think about various aspects of making decisions and understanding their rights.

You can find the program on the NBACL website, www.nbacl.nb.ca (under the Resources section of the web-site, click on “online modules” and then choose “*Opportunity Link*”. The program is found in *Module 4: Advocacy Skills for Families* -plain language version with audio).

(e) *Engage students directly in planning and decision making in the transition to work process.* This aspect is critical to ensure that student post school goals (and the activities that will help student achieve



their goals) are matched with student strengths, interests and wishes. Person centred and directed planning processes described below under Component # 2 are often useful ways to provide opportunities for students to be engaged in school to work planning. While families have important support roles in the transition planning process, students should also have opportunities to have their say without parents present. Experience has shown that sometimes students are more reluctant to speak for themselves when a parent is present. Sometimes students will also be more prepared to talk about certain issues when a parent is not in the room.

Component 2: Planning

Successful post school employment outcomes will be more likely achieved if the transition process starts with planning and discovery. This process involves a number of key elements and evolves over time and should ideally begin at the middle school level.

Like many young people, youth with a disability may have limited awareness about their goals for after high school. Some families may also not be thinking that far ahead and may not be encouraging their children to think about employment and other goals for adult life. This lack of focus on what will come next in the life of the student means that the school and other service systems play a critical role in making sure that these issues are being addressed in a systematic way.



Planning for the transition to work should be a shared responsibility between the student, family, school system, and community.

Person Centred Planning

Increasingly, “person centred” approaches to planning are being used to assist people with an intellectual disability to plan for

their futures in community. In the context of transition planning from school to work, person centred planning provides a focus for good individualized planning. As such:

Person centred transition planning . . . describes a process that allows a student to create a plan that will successfully transition them to their chosen adult outcome. In many ways, person centred transition planning is simply good values driven planning. Good planning starts with the realization that every person is an individual with strengths, needs and preferences. Good planning involves those who know the person best. It engages a broad array of resources and is creative at heart. (Long Island Transition Coordination Site, on-line)

Some key characteristics of person centred approaches to transition planning include:

- ◆ Learning about a person’s dreams, interests, talents, and what makes him or her unique;
- ◆ Assisting a person to identify his or her own vision of what he or she would like to do by asking, “What do you want?”;
- ◆ Continually focusing on the person for whom planning is being done and on his or her expressed wishes;
- ◆ Helping people to identify concrete goals and the ways to achieve these.

Person-centred planning is not merely a short series of meetings with a purpose to produce a static plan or to monitor a person’s life. Rather, it is an ongoing process that evolves as aspects of a desired future are achieved.

Planning Facilitation



Person centred planning is best achieved when planning is actively facilitated. In the transition to work context, a planning facilitator can have a variety of roles, including:

- ◆ Getting to know the person well and gathering information about a student's strengths, interests and needs;
- ◆ Providing information on transition and employment issues;
- ◆ Coordinating and facilitating transition planning meetings and the transition planning process generally;
- ◆ Assisting students identify their dreams and goals for the future, and facilitating planning processes (such as PATH) that are designed to encourage dreaming and goal setting;
- ◆ Investigating community programs and resources that may benefit students before and after they complete high school;
- ◆ In cooperation with school Cooperative Education teachers, approaching employers and other organizations to arrange work experience and volunteer opportunities;
- ◆ In collaboration with the transition planning team, prepare and finalize documented transition plans; and
- ◆ Providing follow up support to ensure that activities in the transition plan are being carried out.

NBACL offers transition to work planning facilitation assistance to high school youth with an intellectual disability in various areas of the province. Contact NBACL for more information.

Component 3: Employment/Career Exploration

Transition to work planning can be enhanced with employment and career exploration activities. These are opportunities for youth to gain exposure to a variety of work environments in order to explore interests within a real work setting. Employment and career exploration is linked with transition planning as it helps students to make choices about future employment goals. This can be most valuable for students that have had little or no opportunity to think about what kind of work that they would like to pursue.

Employment and career exploration may involve student participation in a formal grade 11 Career Exploration course offered at some schools. Either within such a course or as part of general transition to work planning, direct experience activities can be very useful. These can include activities such as:

- ◆ Job shadowing;
- ◆ Field trips to worksites;
- ◆ Job fairs;
- ◆ Mentoring activities with recent school graduates who are working; and
- ◆ Opportunities to meet with employers and talk about different types of work.

In the Francophone education sector, students with a programme d'adaptation scolaire have access to a new program called “trousses d'exploration de métiers semi-spécialisés”, which provide kits for learning about different

types of work found in the community (e.g. worker in a pet store or flower shop) and for preparing students for a work experience placement in the field.

Through these types of activities students can learn about work by watching various types of work being performed, talking with others about their work and sampling work at a variety of work settings. Employment and career exploration can start as early as middle school and continue through the early high school years. They should be built into the planning process for each student.



Component 4: Effective Work Preparation

Work preparation goes beyond learning about work possibilities and identifying student interests and goals. It involves helping students learn about and develop employability skills, including important social skills. Work preparation requires structured learning opportunities that use a defined set of skills to be addressed. For high school students, these opportunities can start at any time but should be happening no later than their grade 11 year.

Within structured work preparation, students are provided with basic information and opportunities to learn essential employment related skills. Where possible, work preparation activities should be conducted in collaboration with a community employment agency. These agencies have specific knowledge and understanding of employability skills and strategies for assisting people with disabilities to learn and develop skills. Alternatively, community employment agencies can be used to provide educators with professional learning opportunities on employment preparation strategies.

Employer representatives may also invited to participate in conducting mock interviews and in discussing appropriate workplace conduct.

The following work preparation topics are some of the most important aspects to cover:

- ◆ How to look for a job
- ◆ Refuse to start at the bottom and what to do instead
- ◆ Refuse to work odd hours and what to do instead

- ◆ What an employer expects once you've landed the job
- ◆ Proper hygiene and dress
- ◆ Positive work attitudes
- ◆ Resume writing and cover letters
- ◆ Positive interview strategies (and mock interviews)

Many of these topics are intentionally designed to demonstrate the wrong and proper way to look for a job, conduct interviews, and act within a workplace. Using this method will support students with an intellectual disability to understand the differences between what a good job seeker or employee does and what will prevent someone from becoming employed.

Resources developed by the James Stanfield Company are effective tools to assist students learn essential work skills. These are English language DVD based tools that use actors portraying improper and proper ways to act, dress, etc. in a workplace. "Role play" strategies to re-enforce learning are also an effective practice. These strategies are helpful to youth with an intellectual disability who often learn best by experience based opportunities. NBACL has used outside "actors" who are asked to demonstrate both proper and improper ways of doing things (such as proper dress and hygiene).

Work preparation activities can also include learning CPR and (where available) learning to use public transportation systems. It should also involve instruction on workplace safety as employer safety concerns can often be a barrier to employment.

Component 5: Collaborating with Employment Agencies and Employers

Collaboration with community employment agencies and employers are a critical part of school to work transitions.

Employers provide access to short term “job shadowing” opportunities as well as longer term work experience programming. Employers may also be willing to participate in transition planning and can be invited to assist with work preparation activities (such as practice interviews). Employers are an asset in the transition to work process and need to be intentionally cultivated to play a variety of roles.

Community employment agencies also offer important expertise in employment related issues and can be a valuable partner in facilitating successful transitions to work. In 2007, policy changes were introduced in New Brunswick that offered support for students with a disability to plan for the transition from school to work. Under these policy changes Employment Assistance Services (EAS) agencies are permitted to provide services to assist with the transition from school to work for youth who are still attending high school. These agencies can play vital support roles in preparing youth for work and in implementing work experience programs. Some agencies may be more willing to become involved than others. Transition coordinators or facilitators should engage in discussions with the appropriate agency in their area to determine how to best to collaborate in the school to work transition process. Some possible roles for employment agencies include:

- ◆ Participating on a student’s transition planning team (as required);
- ◆ Assisting with one of more work preparation activities within the school (see the information above);
- ◆ Assisting with identifying and/or arranging of job shadowing or other employment exploration opportunities for youth;
- ◆ Helping to identify potential work experience places with community employers;
- ◆ Assisting with monitoring and evaluating work experience programs; and
- ◆ Organizing and supervising job coach supports while students are on work experience programs.



A key practice is the documentation of roles and responsibilities of individuals and organizations that are involved in transition to work activities. This will help to avoid confusion and provide students, families, school personnel and community collaborators with clear a direction on who is responsible for what.

Component 6: School Related Work Experience (Work Based Learning)

Work experience means having opportunities to actually experience different kinds of jobs and one's own role as an employee. Sometimes, work experiences are provided or simulated within the school. Most often, however, work experience will mean that a student actually performs a job at a regular workplace in the community. Work experiences can either be for a very short time or last several months, and may be either paid or unpaid. Work experiences that are a part of a school program and that occur during the school day are not by law permitted to provide pay.

Some schools may use facility based day programs as "work experience" opportunities for youth with an intellectual disability. These activities do not provide students with a "real work" experience in the community.

In most high schools, work experience programming is delivered through Cooperative Education courses. These are credit based courses designed to provide all high school students the opportunity to gain valuable employment experience and to learn job related skills. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development guidelines for Career Exploration and Cooperative Education can be found on-line (see the References and Additional Resources section for link information). Please note that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is currently reviewing its Cooperative Education program.

In some schools, work experience for students with an intellectual disability may be provided under education programs that are not considered Cooperative Education courses.

Work experience should build on what a student will have learned about work through career awareness and work preparation learning activities. Work experience is important because it will:

- ◆ Help a student identify his or her interests;
- ◆ Allow a student to explore a range of different jobs or occupations through hands on experience;
- ◆ Allow a student to become familiar with a variety of work settings; and
- ◆ Assist a student in developing skills that may be required for employment.

For work experience activities to be useful they should:

- ◆ Provide hands on experience at worksites within the community (with the provision of whatever support the student may require);
- ◆ Be linked to the transition goals the student has set; and
- ◆ Be decided on the basis of the student's interests and abilities.

Making decisions about the best possible work experience opportunities should be part of transition planning. Any specific activities that are identified should become part of the action plan for each student.



Other aspects of effective work experience include the following practices:

(a) *Documenting Learning Objectives*

When a work experience opportunity has been secured specific learning objectives for the student should be identified and documented. These objectives can relate to general goals such as learning to follow instructions, learning about workplace safety, and adhering to basic workplace expectations (such as arriving and leaving on time, being appropriately dressed, etc.). Objectives can also address specific job related skills for the occupation that the student is experiencing (see the information below on structured workplace learning). Learning objectives should be reviewed with the student,

family and employer prior to the start of the work experience opportunity.

(b) *Conducting On-Site Visits and Meetings with the Employer*

Before work experience opportunities commence, the school (or community) coordinator should undertake an on-site visit with community employer. This visit will have a variety of purposes including:

- Becoming familiar with the workplace – with a focus on the physical layout, the ‘social’ conditions of the workplace, and the people with whom the student will be interacting (particularly immediate supervisors and co-workers).
- Learning about the job that the student will be learning, including the specific tasks, the sequence of tasks, and the requirements of the employer for job performance.
- Determining if the student may require specific accommodations in order to learn and do the job effectively. Accommodations may take many forms and can involve strategies such as picture cues, time-keeping aids, modified job tasks, etc.
- Determining any specific workplace safety issues and practices that may need to be reviewed with the student.
- Establishing the roles of the employer, workplace supervisors, the work experience coordinator, employment support workers (such as a coach), and the student.

(c) *Introducing the Student to the Workplace*

Before the student begins his or her work experience opportunity, some activities to introduce the student to the workplace will be important. These can include the following:

- Having the student participate in an ‘interview’ with the employer to discuss the job and its responsibilities. This step may help to prepare the student for future job interviews.
- Providing a general orientation to the workplace and a review of the specific job the student will be learning.
- Introducing the student to workplace supervisors and potential co-workers.

(d) *Providing Job Coach/Mentor Support*

Some students with an intellectual disability will require on the job support to effectively participate in work experience programs. There are a number of employment training and job coaching strategies that have been proven effective in helping people develop job skills, learn job tasks and become more independent within the workplace. These include conducting job and task analyses, developing concrete task lists, identifying and developing appropriate workplace accommodations, providing timely prompts and reinforcement within the work environment, support fading strategies, etc.

Currently, job support (when provided) is usually done through Educational Assistants. However, difficulties can arise when relying on EAs to provide job related



supports. EAs may not be readily available to leave the school because of other duties they are expected to perform, making it difficult for them to provide job support to students on community work experience placements. In this regard, a student may be denied opportunities to experience work in the community because an EA is not available. Also, EAs (while they may know particular students well) may not have received training in providing job training and coaching supports, nor may they have detailed knowledge of the particular job that the student has to learn.

One practice involves providing EAs (who are able to leave the school to provide work experience support) with training on effective job coaching strategies.

Alternatively, some school districts may be willing to have employment supports provided by individuals who are already trained in job coaching. The provision of trained job coaches is usually done through local employment agencies that use coaches as part of their regular way of supporting people with an intellectual disability to learn a new job. Agencies will need to be willing to take on these roles with high school students on school arranged work programs. In addition, additional funding will likely be required.

(e) *Considering Structured Work Based Learning*

Structured work opportunities go beyond traditional work experience in that students are expected to learn occupation or industry specific skills. Typically, these skills are identified in “training packages” that include specific competencies for the workplace. To use this type of work experience practice some upfront work to identify job specific skills and competencies is required.

(f) *Evaluating Work Experience*

A student’s transition planning team should be prepared to evaluate the quality of the work experience. This means that people have to take the time to determine the effectiveness of the work experience. Here are some general questions to consider:

- Was the work experience desired by the student and supported by the student’s family and the transition-planning team?
- Has the work experience been consistent with the goals set out as part of the student’s transition plan?
- If the student required help on the job site, was it adequately provided?
- How much responsibility has the employer or the student’s co-workers taken to provide this support?
- Has the workplace generally been a positive experience for the student? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Has the work experience provided the student an opportunity to practice skills he or she has learned while in school?
- Has the work experience helped the student to develop new social and work related skills and to develop a positive attitude towards work?

Depending on the nature and duration of the work experience, evaluation may also need to involve the learning of specific job skills and competencies. This will need to be a common practice if a structured work based learning opportunity is developed for the student.

Conclusion

The path to employment for youth with an intellectual disability can be a successful one when attention is paid to the practices and strategies that make a real difference. This guide has outlined some key components of effective practice that are based on research and experience in New Brunswick and elsewhere. Schools and school districts that implement these practices will lay the foundation for successful employment outcomes for today's youth. These outcomes will be strengthened when students, families, community organizations and employers are engaged as important collaborators in the transition to work process.



References and Additional Resources

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The New Brunswick Association for Community Living gratefully acknowledges funding for this publication provided by the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnership Program – Disability Component.

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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