

Domain ⑤: Community-Based Work Experiences

Work is a social good that should be available to everyone. It is how a vast majority of adults make a living for themselves and their families. More than just providing monetary benefits, work also helps to boost psychological wellbeing. As such, preparing youth for work is an important part of nurturing their development and independence. However, the reality is that this isn't happening on the scale that it should be. As stated by the Association of People Supporting Employment First (2014), "Many of our nation's students are leaving school without any significant work experience or a clear career plan. This problem is even more significant for students with disabilities. Youth with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school, not receive adequate job training, become involved in the juvenile justice system, and remain on government programs resulting in a life of poverty and cyclical dependence. Evidence-based research has conclusively documented that youth with significant disabilities who were educated in inclusive settings, exposed to work experience and career exploration, and participated in a paid work experience during school had better postsecondary outcomes and higher rates of sustainable employment."

Speaking to the evidence-based research, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, has identified 17 evidence-based predictors of post-school employment, education and independent living. When they say "predictors," they are talking about different interventions that occur while a student is in school that will help promote positive post-school outcomes. Work experience while in high school has been confirmed through research to be a strong predictor of employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Poignantly:

- Students who had a job at the time of high school exit were 5.1 times more likely to be engaged in post-school employment (Rabren et al., 2002 cited in NSTTAC, 2011).
- Students who participated in community-based training that involved instruction in non-school, natural environments focused on development of social skills, domestic skills, accessing public transportation, and on-the-job training were more likely to be engaged in post-school employment (White & Weiner, 2004 cited in Test et al., 2009).

In other words, if a student gets real world work experience during high school, they are more likely to find community-based competitive work as an adult.

Competitive Work means work in the labor market that is performed:

- on a full-time or part-time basis
- in an integrated setting – meaning a setting that is typically found in the community where people with and without disabilities interact
- for which the individual is compensated at or above minimum wage (but not less than the customary and usual wage paid by an employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals who are not disabled) (NDRN, 2011).

A common worry that surrounds the world of work for people with disabilities is that competitive employment will lead to the loss of different forms of government and state assistance (e.g., Social Security Benefits). According to Cimera's (2010) research however, "... supported employment was cost efficient from the workers' perspective. That is, on average, individuals with intellectual disabilities who became successfully employed within their communities gained greater monetary benefits (i.e., wages earned) than the resulting monetary costs (i.e., forgone wages, taxes paid, reduction in subsidies)."