Playbook Introduction

Career-connected learning is an educational strategy that combines high-quality academic instruction, skill-based learning, and real-world experiences to prepare students with the knowledge and skills that they need to pursue their college and career goals. Career-connected learning can be delivered in a variety of ways, including in core content classes, through career and technical education (CTE) programs, in partnership with community and technical colleges, and through work-based learning experiences like job fairs, job shadows, internships, pre-apprenticeships, and registered apprenticeship programs. Career-connected learning is especially important for an often-overlooked group of individuals—students with disabilities.[1]

As a nation, it is important that we recognize the untapped potential for individuals with disabilities in the workforce and create opportunities that lead to their successful participation. Students with disabilities can and do move on to successfully participate in the workforce when given the opportunity and supports to do so, and in fact, access to these opportunities is foundational to Federal disability and workforce laws. All young people deserve equitable access to career-connected learning that provides the opportunity to gain meaningful work experience, earn college credits, and work towards an industry credential before they graduate high school. Making this a reality is possible and requires commitment and investment at all levels, including Federal, state, and local partners. Career-connected learning is an essential pathway into the workforce, and it should be available, accessible, and effective for students with disabilities.

A growing body of evidence indicates that students with disabilities in CTE not only have higher rates of secondary school completion and graduation, but also are more probable to be armed with academic aptitude, and employability skills that are portable. Connecting CTE to the transition planning of students with disabilities can be an effective way to support students with disabilities to stay in school and at the same time preventing them from dropping out. For example:

- A 2018 study examined the outcomes of students with disabilities who were enrolled in regional CTE high schools in Massachusetts and found that these students were more likely to graduate on-time than students with disabilities who attended school in other settings.
- Two other studies (in 2016 and 2019) concluded that youth with learning disabilities who completed a concentration of four CTE courses in a single program area were more likely to be employed after high school graduation than youth with learning disabilities who took no or fewer CTE courses.
- Another study found that youth with a specific learning disability or an emotional/behavioral disorder who completed three CTE courses in a single program area were significantly more likely to be employed full-time during the first two years after high school.
- During the 2021-2022 school year, the average on-time graduation rate of students with disabilities was 75% but students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their peers in the general population, and those who do pursue postsecondary education are more likely to drop out than students without disabilities. Another study of an earlier

[1] For purposes of the VR program, the term "student with a disability" is defined in section 7(37) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act) and 34 C.F.R. 361.5(c)(51) as an individual with a disability in an education program who is 14 to 21 years old (or the age range in the State for the receipt of transition services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and who is receiving special education and related services under IDEA or services under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. For purposes of services provided under IDEA, the term "child with a disability" is defined in IDEA as a child evaluated in accordance with IDEA requirements as having a disability and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. 34 C.F.R. § 300.8. Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, individuals with disabilities includes elementary and secondary students who: (1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (2) have a record of such an impairment, or (3) are regarded as having such an impairment. 34 C.F.R. §104.3(j) and (l)

cohort of students with disabilities who were attending community college found that 51% dropped out without earning a postsecondary credential after 3 years of attendance.

- The unemployment rate for people with a disability was 7.2% in 2023, about twice that of those with no disability (3.5%). In 2017, the poverty rate of working age adults (i.e., ages 18 to 64) with disabilities was almost more than twice that of working age adults who did not have a disability. In 2022, among 59,988 persons who began participating in Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services between the ages of 16 to 18, 60% were still employed in the second quarter after exit, with a median earning of $4,738. Among 49,550 persons who were 19 to 24 at the time VR services were initiated, 57% were found to be working in the second quarter after exit, with a median earning of $4,259.
- In 2021–22, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education and/or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.3 million, or the equivalent of 15% of all public-school students. Among students receiving special education and/or related services, the most common category of disability was specific learning disabilities, like dyslexia (a reading disability) or dyscalculia (a math disability).
- VR agencies report approximately 1.5 million individuals engage in VR services each year. In program year 2022, among 818,646 eligible individuals that had initiated VR services 421,481 (51.5%) were under age 25 at the time services began. Among participants of the VR in program year 2022, at the time that services began 2% were under age 16, 29% were between the ages of 16 to 18, and 20% between the ages of 19 to 24.
- Nationally, students with disabilities (SWD) are one of the special populations for which CTE must collect data. That includes student pathways and numbers/their percentage participating in CTE. For a state-by-state breakdown and further statistics on the U.S. public school Individuals With Disabilities (IWD) population participating in CTE, please refer to the Perkins Collaborative Resource Network (PCRN) site.
- Students with disabilities continue to lag their peers without disabilities in postsecondary education and employment. Outcomes of youth with disabilities are influenced by many factors including but not limited to parent expectations and services received to support individual needs. Services provided to students while in high school also contribute to positive outcomes. One important transition service that can be provided to youth while in high school to assist in mitigating poor outcomes for youth with disabilities is access to career and technical education.

Unlocking Career Success

Unlocking Career Success is an interagency initiative that reimagines how our nation's high schools prepare all students to thrive in their future education and careers. The initiative blurs the lines between high school, college, and career, providing students with accelerated and innovative opportunities to earn college credits and gain real-world career experiences. This joint effort across the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Commerce supports public and private sector leaders, government agencies, and other community-based organizations to help students earn postsecondary degrees and industry-recognized credentials that our employers need, and our economy demands. Unlocking Career Success seeks to strengthen systems of multiple pathways to success, fulfilling the promise of education as the key to economic and social mobility, and providing our students with rewarding, joyful, purposeful college and career pathways that lead them to reach their endless potential.

Actions

Schools, community-based organizations, and business and industry can increase pathways through career-connected learning to Raise the Bar for student success by taking steps to:

1. Leverage Federal funds to support individuals with disabilities and CTE.

- *IDEA* is a Federal law that provides more than $15 billion in Federal funds to States, and through States to local educational agencies (LEAs), to assist in providing special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities. One primary purpose of IDEA is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.
- The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (*WIOA)* represents the first major reform of the publicly funded workforce development system in more than 15 years. *Title IV of WIOA* amends the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act) by significantly revising requirements for, among others, the State VR program, particularly about its role as a core partner in the workforce development system. The law authorizes increased access to employment, education, training, and support services to assist individuals with disabilities, including youth and students with disabilities, to succeed in the competitive labor market. As a core partner in the one-stop service delivery system, the State VR program provides individuals with disabilities the services they need to compete for and achieve high-quality employment in the 21st century global economy.
- Additionally, *Title I* of the *Rehabilitation Act* is meant to assist each State in operating a statewide comprehensive, coordinated, effective, efficient, and accountable State VR program that is an integral part of a statewide workforce development system. The purpose of the VR program is to assess, plan, and provide VR services to individuals with disabilities, especially individuals with the most significant disabilities, so that they may prepare for and engage in competitive integrated employment consistent with their unique strengths, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, resources, and informed choice. The continuum of VR services offered by VR agencies provides opportunity for early engagement, career exploration, education and training, support services, and invaluable workforce experience. The VR program receives more than $4 billion in Federal funds annually.
- Students with disabilities have rights under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits disability discrimination by recipients of Federal financial assistance, including public elementary and secondary schools. Section 504 also includes requirements for the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for elementary and secondary students with disabilities, including regular or special education and related aids and services that are designed to meet their individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met and certain procedural requirements.
- Additionally, *the Rehabilitation Act* requires that VR agencies reserve at least 15% of their VR allotment to coordinate with LEAs in providing, or arranging for the provision of, pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities.

- In fiscal year 2022, 42 states met the requirement to reserve and expend at least 15 percent of the state's matched Federal VR allotment to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. This is an increase of 14 states from 2021.
- From fiscal year 2021 to 2022, 37 states increased the percentage of Federal funds reserved and expended for these services. This amounted to more than $46 million in additional Federal dollars being spent on pre-employment transition services in 2022.
- In Program Year 2022, VR agencies provided more than 1.6 million pre-employment transition services to approximately 280,000 students with disabilities.

- The U.S. Department of Education also hosts a discretionary grant program – the Disability Innovation Fund. The purpose of the Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) Program, as provided by the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Pub. L. 117-328), is to support innovative activities aimed at increasing competitive integrated employment (CIE) as defined in section 7 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. 705(5)) for youth and other individuals with disabilities.
- Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins V) supports States in their implementation of CTE programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels, which includes strategies that promote equity in CTE through data analysis, targeted funding for special populations, in which IWDs are named, as well as technical assistance which could include professional development and the engagement of stakeholders that represent students who are members of special populations.
  - Perkins V requires State education agencies to use 0.1% or $50,000 (whichever is less) of their CTE State leadership funds for the recruitment of special populations into CTE programs, and the accountability provisions in Perkins V require states to disaggregate data. Perkins V offers states and districts the flexibility to support students with disabilities in the following ways:
    - Increase access and completion for special populations, which include students with disabilities.
    - Prepare and support teachers, specialized instructional support personnel and paraprofessionals so they can provide appropriate accommodations for students who are members of special populations.
    - Develop strategies for the recruitment of special needs populations into programs that lead to high-wage, high-skill, in-demand careers, and to coordinate the Perkins state plan with IDEA.

2. Incorporate tools for students, families, and educators to better engage IWDs in career-connected learning.

Action Items for Students and Caregivers:

- Participate in your school's career-connected educational programs, which can help students and families to better understand what industries and occupations and the related educational programs that exist in their community. For example, San Clemente High School's Meet the Industry Night helps to ensure that students and their families are aware of careers and the types of postsecondary opportunities that exist in the community.

- Consider supplementary programs that offer workforce readiness curricula. The Florida Center for Students offers a program called Build Your Future, designed for students with intellectual disabilities. This program has curriculum that includes self-advocacy, interpersonal relationships, employment goals, work-related 21st century skills, effective communications, decision-making and effective use of technology.

Action Items for Educators:

- Create awareness about programs that are designed for students and families. Families play a critical role in the education of their children and have a strong influence on the interests, talents, and skills that they bring with them to school. Every effort should be made to inform and communicate with families and students as they navigate important educational decisions, including when and how to enroll in CTE and other career-connected learning programs.
- Consider how you will provide accommodations to better support the unique needs of individual students. In Minnesota, the state provides funding through "Access to Career and Technical Education-Special Education funding" to school districts and charter schools to support students with disabilities who may require accommodations or modifications in order to participate successfully in CTE and other work-based learning programs.

3. Consider policies, processes, programs, and practices that increase access to and success in career-connected learning for students with disabilities.

Action Items for Local Leaders (e.g., principals, superintendents, mayors, and county executives):

- Review data regularly to systematically ensure equitable enrollment for special populations, including students with disabilities. For example, The Kentucky Profile of Transition Practice (KPTP) serves as an important tool to guide district teams in reviewing, assessing and, when appropriate, making changes and improvements to postsecondary transition practices and programs including CTE for students with disabilities.
- Actively collaborate across the education to workforce ecosystem to create programs for students who need additional supports. In Boise Idaho, the Blackfoot district identified CTE as an area of need for its students with disabilities. This led to a collaboration between the Blackfoot district, Boise Public Schools, and the Idaho Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (IDVR) to create an afterschool CTE program that engaged students with disabilities. IDVR developed a contract with the school district outlining how the service, which is a pre-employment transition service, would be delivered, who would deliver it, and how costs would be covered.
- Partner with workforce partners to ensure that students with disabilities access and proactively participate in CTE. In Arkansas, the Transition Initiative, CTE, Division of Workforce Services and the Rehabilitation and the Division of Services of the Blind partner to create CTE camps at the 9th grade level for students with disabilities.
- Familiarize yourself with current state and national data, collect local and site level data, and use data to determine what percentage of SWDs are currently enrolled in CTE programs, how those numbers compare with other student groups and which students are successful. In Maine, the statewide transition forum creates an opportunity for state educators and transition

leaders to strategize in how to promote a successful pathway for students with disabilities in transition, Pre-ETS, Trades and CTE.

Action Items for State Leaders (e.g., State K12 and higher education agencies, State and local workforce development boards, and Governors):

- Leverage funding streams across agencies, organizations, and programs. In the State of Washington, through funding from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Evergreen State College and the Olympia school district has a nine-month CTE/ School-to Work program where students with disabilities are prepared for competitive employment.
- Consider enacting legislation to enshrine the rights of students with disabilities. In Pennsylvania, the collaboration among the Department of Labor and Industry, Bureau of Special Education and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation led to the adoption of the Employment First Act, with the goal of ensuring that students with disabilities are prepared for competitive employment.
- In Nevada, the statewide initiative brings together CTE, special educators, VR, and provider partners to engage and provide equitable access to, and successful outcomes in CTE programs for students with disabilities.

Additional Resources

- Think College published a fact sheet that provides an explanation of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, or Perkins V, and the benefits it provides to students with intellectual disabilities. There are many implications for students transitioning from secondary to postsecondary school who are pursuing career and technical education.
- Advance CTE has a searchable, filterable database that includes resources on topics like special populations, non-traditional students, delivery systems, infrastructure and zip code equity.
- The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition includes definitions, trainings, and resources on their site to support students with disabilities and the educators who support them.
- Without Limits: A Shared Vision for the Future of Career Technical Education (CTE Without Limits) calls on leaders to ensure each learner feels welcome in, is supported by and has the means to succeed in the career preparation ecosystem, including students with disabilities.
- The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition released a Competitive Integrated Employment Toolkit
- ED's Office of Postsecondary Education's Institutional Services Four Disabilities Programs:
    - The Model Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities
    - The Model Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities Coordinating Center
    - Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities-National Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center
    - National Center for Information and Technical Support for Postsecondary Students With Disabilities
- The Think College Network (TCN): A National Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center created a "Think Higher. Think College." video that highlights inclusiveness, access, and a sense of belonging for these students. This video also highlights how both students with and without intellectual disabilities interact with one another.
- Northern Arizona University's Institute for Human Development created a "There is Always a Way" video which supports why students with intellectual disabilities belong in STEM through the story of a student with multiple disabilities pursuing a college degree in a STEM field through the Supporting Inclusive Practices in College (SIP-C) program at Tohono O'odham Community College located in San Carlos, Arizona.

Legal Disclaimer

This document contains resources (including links) that are provided for the user's convenience. Inclusion of these materials is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed or products or services offered. These materials might contain the views and recommendations of various subject-matter experts, as well as hyperlinked text, contact addresses, and websites to information that other public and private organizations created and maintain. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Department. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.