Building Transition Partnerships in Rural Areas for Employment Readiness

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Abstract

Students with disabilities experience higher rates of unemployment and lower wages as compared to their peers without disabilities (The Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2014). Through collaboration with state Departments of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), schools offer work experiences and training programs during transition planning years to facilitate students’ skill levels, which improves post-school outcomes, especially in obtaining competitive integrated employment (Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler, 2009). This paper provides a rationale and guidance for building partnerships between schools, VR, businesses, and community partners to develop transition opportunities for students with disabilities in rural areas to gain employment readiness skills.
1. Introduction

1.1 Challenge

Students with disabilities experience challenges in school and experience difficulty in obtaining and maintaining competitive integrated employment after exiting high school. Students living in rural areas experience additional barriers as rural schools face unique challenges in developing work experiences for youth. Such challenges include large geographical distance to businesses, competition for limited jobs, and poverty, and high dropout rates (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Morgan & Openshaw, 2011).

Current employment data. Many students in rural areas face shrinking occupational opportunities in their home communities and are anticipated to enter the workforce, family roles, and relative overall disadvantages earlier than urban youth (Crockett & Bingham, 2000). Data from the BLS (2015) portray a dismal picture of employment for youth with disabilities with a 15% employment rate for those between the ages of 16 and 19 compared to nondisabled peers who are employed at 29%. For 20-24-year-olds, those with disabilities are employed at a rate of 35% compared to 65% for those without disabilities. These discrepancies suggest educators, parents, employers, agencies, and providers take action to close the gap. Such actions may include holding town hall meetings, developing paid and unpaid employment opportunities, and providing community diversity training (Hutchins, & Akos, 2012).

1.2 Current Needs

Schools in rural areas may lack financial and business resources to provide experiences; however, school administrators and teachers can focus on building partnerships with businesses to develop pre-employment programs for students (Vandegrift & Danzig, 1993). Morgan and Morgan (2006) identified three additional employment challenges for students with disabilities in rural areas: (a) students may not be able to choose a preferred vocation, (b) students are often unsuccessful competing for jobs, and (c) rural schools may not implement support programs for students with disabilities. Schools need to provide a clear connection between classwork and career pathways for students to help them achieve employment (Morgan & Morgan, 2014).

1.3 Research on Outcomes of Youth in Employment

The more time students with disabilities spend in employment settings, the more opportunities they have to demonstrate their skills, discover their interests, and improve upon their weaknesses (Wehman et al., 2014). Research shows students who have work experiences in high school have better employment outcomes after high school, as compared to their peers with disabilities who did not have employment opportunities in high school (Test et al., 2009).
2. Building a Rural Transition Experience Program

Meeting needs of students with disabilities in rural areas may be a challenge and take the work of many to accomplish. In rural areas, schools must engage parents, agencies, businesses, and other partners in developing and implementing transition programs and activities to meet the needs of their local areas and students (Gold et al., 1997). Doing this alone creates challenges, but teams accomplish much more—even things that were never expected or planned for.

Description. An example of a locally developed rural transition program is Oklahoma’s Working on the Wichitas (WOW!) program. WOW! evolved through a partnership between the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), a special education teacher from Verden Public Schools, Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, and the Galt Foundation, a temporary staffing agency. The goals of the program were to provide: (a) a summer paid work experience for students with disabilities, (b) an outdoor experience in a rural area using local resources, and (c) pre-employment transition services to students. Below we present the details of this program first implemented during the summer of 2016.

Planning. The WOW! planning team was developed by the DRS transition coordinator and local special education teacher. This duo created the goals for the program while sitting in an airport after attending a session at a conference in Oregon where a similar program was highlighted. The goals for the first year of the program were to have a successful work readiness experience for students with disabilities, expose students to careers within the refuge and national park service, and to leave the refuge better than they found it without burning it down (there is a history of wildfires that have destroyed the refuge).

The team was comprised of VR staff, the special education teacher, leader from a temporary staffing agency, and a volunteer (who happened to be a special education teacher from a nearby town who was interested in supporting the program). The team met monthly between October 2015 and May 2016 for at least one hour in person, by phone, and through virtual meetings. During the planning meetings, team members took individual responsibility for accomplishing specific tasks to prepare for the camp. Some of the tasks included (a) soliciting donations (by phone and in person), (b) recruiting students from local areas, (c) making arrangements with officials at the local wildlife refuge, (d) planning meals and shopping lists, (e) developing the daily schedule for the week, (f) planning pre-employment skills activities, and (g) contacting partners to provide team building and learning opportunities for the students (e.g., constructing tee-pee with a local tribal VR staff member).
Interested students had to be at least age 16, have disabilities, be returning to high school in August 2016, and be clients of DRS working toward a vocational goal. Students applied to the program and were interviewed by team members either in person, by phone, or virtually. Selected students then attended an orientation meeting with their parents to learn about the expectations of the program, fill out payroll paperwork, get to know program staff and other students, and prepare for the camp. The first year’s participants were all males between the ages of 16 and 18 and from rural communities within Oklahoma (see Table 1).

**Implementation.** The program began the first full week in June on a Monday at 11:00 am and ended at 3:00 pm on Friday with everyone sleeping in tents at a campground within the refuge. Daily schedules existed down to the hour comprised of one-third of the day working with a park ranger, one-third of the day doing applied employability skills activities, and one-third of the day doing leisure and recreational activities. A typical day begins with (1) waking up at 7:00 am, (2) preparing and eating breakfast, (3) preparing for the day’s work tasks, including personal hygiene, (4) working with the park ranger, (5) a lunch break, (6) finishing out the day’s work, (7) participating in employability skills activities, (8) preparing and eating dinner, (9) leisure activities, (10) taking care of personal hygiene, (11) campfire desserts and casual conversations, and (12) lights out by 9:00 pm. Students earned a minimum wage of $7.25 per hour for working with the ranger and completing employability activities. The Galt Foundation was the employer of record, maintained liability, paid students, and monitored documentation and time. DRS contracts with Galt and reimburses them for student wages.

Work consisted of scraping paint off old cabins, removing more than one mile of old fencing, and maintaining hiking trails. It is interesting to note that the park ranger and several other refuge staff mentioned that our program participants worked harder and demonstrated a better work ethic than other student groups they have had in the past.

**Job readiness skills.** Program students collaborated on budgeting activities and games (e.g., The Game of Life board game) and participated in job related skills activities, such as understanding body language, asking for time off work, solving conflict at work, and discussing potential jobs within the refuge. VR staff and the lead teacher conducted all of the instructional and employment related activities. Students worked in teams to prepare all daily meals by campfire or on a grill. WOW! was a comprehensive program covering critical pre-employment transition areas for DRS, such as counseling for career awareness, work-based learning experiences, work-readiness including independent living skills, and self-advocacy training. Staff and volunteers were present 24 hours each day, including an onsite nurse hired through
Galt to assist with any medical needs. Leisure activities included hiking, swimming, fishing, and making homemade ice cream or s’mores, which were new experiences for some students.

**Program Details.** Each VR staff member, paid teacher, and community volunteer completed tasks, including seeking donations to maximize dollars and minimize expenses. Through partnerships with local businesses and banks, the team secured donations of cash, gift cards, sleeping bags, sunscreen, water bottles, hygiene kits, backpacks, and first aid kits. The team had to purchase more tents, food, lanterns, and unexpected supplies due to being outdoors 24 hours each day in a wildlife refuge where wildlife is in charge and we do not have access to the typical amenities found in a home. Team members had an unexpected expense when resident raccoons raided the food storage containers and either ate or took all of the bread products and chocolate, thereby causing the team to have to spend funds to replace the items. This experience taught the team to find an alternative storage location for the food (i.e., locked vehicles). The community was supportive of this program and willing to participate, so much so that the Friends of the Wichitas, a nonprofit organization that promotes environmental education, paid for the weekly campsite fee.

**Anecdotal Outcomes.** Prior to beginning WOW!, students said they had never had “real” jobs or that they had only worked for family members in the past. Many students had also never been away from home for this long (or even overnight), and there was an enhanced appreciation of their parents. After the program, students expressed an increased love for the outdoors, a better understanding of what a job entails, knowledge of jobs in parks and refuges, and interest in college readiness activities. Three of the five participants applied for community jobs and were able to use the teacher as a reference for past employment experience. In 2017, DRS expanded WOW! and offered it for two weeks—with the second week being for those between 18-24.

**Recommendations.** The first year of WOW! was successful because of the strong teamwork and consistency in planning and follow through on a specific timeline by the key partners. It also helped that Oregon staff provided the team with planning materials from their program. It is much easier to leverage resources than to start from scratch.

Steps to follow to create your own work experience similar to WOW! include (a) identifying a need within your community; (b) identifying a local partner, such as a national park, refuge, zoo, or state park; (c) identifying the appropriate liaison for that partner (use personal connections); (d) setting up a meeting with the liaison to pitch the idea of the work program; (e) identifying other partners to support the program; (f) holding regular planning
meetings, including developing calendars of events and deadlines, and use technology to arrange meetings; (g) assigning a lead to coordinate efforts of the group and facilitate communication, assign roles, follow-up; (h) ensuring shared responsibility of the tasks, including developing a packing list, develop an orientation agenda and conduct an orientation for all participants and their families; (i) ensuring all participant paperwork is complete prior to starting the program (i.e., medical needs, emergency contacts, media release, new employee payroll packet); and (j) developing contracts for paid staff and memorandums of agreement between partners. Another key element of WOW! is the application and interview process of the candidates. Not all programs may include this feature; however, interviews provided the planning team good information about the abilities, behaviors, and interests of the candidates.

Other tasks necessary to complete throughout the year include (a) developing marketing materials and disseminating widely in the geographic recruitment area; (b) solicit donations for materials, supplies, and funds; (c) develop onsite work tasks in collaboration with the liaison, partners, and, in our case, the park ranger; (d) develop onsite employability skills and leisure activities; (e) plan daily meals; (f) generate grocery and supplies shopping lists; (g) identify staff and volunteers to cover shifts; and (h) identify what materials and supplies each staff person or volunteer will bring and assign staff and volunteers to lead all daily activities. It is important to have team leaders begin delegating tasks to team members. Such tasks include, but are not limited to, (a) implementing onsite activities, (b) supervising students throughout the weeklong camp, (c) shopping for food, (d) shopping for supplies, (e) setting up interviews, and (f) reaching out to community partners (e.g., Wal-Mart, Academy Sports, Target, Tribal VR programs).

Additional strategies that contributed to the success of WOW! consist of having the leader stay on track with arranging regular team meetings, maintaining communication, identifying needs, and following up on incomplete tasks. Our team also had the benefit of having a nonprofit who supported the camp and paid for the weeklong campsite rental. Using technology for planning was essential as team members were spread out across the state. One example of our use of technology was using Google docs for planning, sharing information, and storing photos, videos, and program documents (e.g., student releases of information, brochures, memorandum of understanding). We also used phone conference options and online meetings to allow more team members to participate. Team member flexibility before and during camp was key to the flow of the program, especially when immediate changes in the preset daily schedule were necessary.
3. Conclusion

Students with disabilities living in rural areas do not have to experience fewer transition related activities or work experiences just because of their environmental surroundings. If anything, those environmental surroundings coupled with fresh ideas from school staff, parents, community partners, and agency staff can be used to provide experiences for the youth. By having good communication, using technology, sharing work tasks, and clearly defining participant expectations, our team created an outdoor work experience for students with disabilities in rural areas. Gold et al. (1997) sum up the strengths of rural areas in that “…the sense of community which exists in rural locations has been cited as the single critical element leading to a quality educational experience for rural students” (p. 2). It is that sense of community that brings together schools and businesses contributed to the success of WOW! The program presented in this brief is a product of such creative thinking and coordinated service delivery between schools, agencies, and community partners. WOW! serves as an example for other rural areas to find how they can use what they have in their communities to their advantage for the benefit of students with disabilities.

References


Hutchins, B. C., & Akos, P. (2012). Rural high school youth’s access to and use of school-to-work programs. The Career Development Quarterly, 61, 210-266.


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