

Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities

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Preparing all students, including students with disabilities, for life after high school is a critical responsibility for California’s education system. Engaging students and their families in discussions regarding careers, employment, and the pre-requisites for postsecondary education, training, and employment must start early and continue throughout their educational experiences. While there are programs in California that benefit students as they explore career opportunities, students with disabilities are seldom included in these programs. Three essential actions drive the development and implementation of a K–14 work-based learning model for youth with disabilities (and, we believe, for all youth): strengthen expectations, leverage opportunities, and integrate supports. We encourage the implementation of these actions early in the student’s education. Specific policy recommendations for California are provided based on these actions.

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Importance of Work Experiences for All Students

“ I was scared. I didn’t want to work, but [my teacher] expected me to work. Finally, I decided I was ready. I feel I learned a lot. Everything I learned here I keep it in my heart because it’s for my own good. I want to keep on working. I enjoy working.”

STUDENT

There is a growing statewide recognition of the importance of workforce preparation for all California youth. This recognition includes significant funding initiatives and accountability incentives. California’s youth, including those with disabilities, should be looking towards a future of gainful employment, fulfilling careers, and economic self-sufficiency. The future seems promising especially in light of California’s historically low unemployment rate at 4 percent.¹ Yet individuals with disabilities continue to lag behind individuals without disabilities with an unemployment rate of 13 percent.² In terms of workforce preparation, California’s youth are leaving high school inadequately prepared to enter the workforce.³ The outlook for youth with disabilities is even more acute: a 13 percent dropout rate compared to 9.6 percent for their peers without disabilities; a high school graduation rate with a diploma at 66 percent compared to 83 percent for students without a disability.⁴ The high unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities is compounded by their lack of workforce preparation in high school and postsecondary education. The evidence paints a grim future for California’s youth with disabilities.

The Role of K–12 Education in Workforce Preparation

“ Students were super young, 14 years old, when they started in [the program]. You can tell they’ve been mentored and taken care of. They know how to get a job and fill out job applications. They have resumes and are more work ready than others because they were educated in the work world.”

LEA STAFF

As part of the pipeline for skilled and qualified workers, K–14 education plays a key role in preparing California’s future workforce. The California Department of Education (CDE) has incorporated incentives and recognition of college/career readiness into

On the cover: Kyla, a CaPROMISE participant, at a worksite developed through the West End Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).

its Dashboard Accountability system. The College/Career Indicator⁵ evaluates schools based on the percentage of graduates who are either college or career ready. In addition, the CDE has released grant dollars (e.g., the Career Technical Education Incentive Grant [CTEIG] Program) to advance their career development programs. The California Community College Chancellor's Office provides competitive funds through the K12 Strong Workforce Program (SWP), which extends career and workforce preparation as a collaborative K–14 and industry responsibility. Applicants are responsible for affirming that youth with disabilities will be served by these funded programs.

It is imperative that these program efforts provide equitable access and achieve evidence-based outcomes for youth with disabilities. For example, by incorporating work-based learning experiences into the K–12 curriculum, students with disabilities can build the “soft skills necessary to acquire employment, hard skills necessary to perform job tasks, and social skills necessary to maintain employment.”⁶

Three essential actions drive the development and implementation of a K–14 work-based learning model for youth with disabilities:

1. **Strengthen expectations:** focus on student abilities and interests; parental knowledge and attitudes; the inclusion of all students; breaking stereotypes; graduating with a diploma; and making a postsecondary plan to earn a livable wage.
2. **Leverage opportunities:** support career awareness in middle school and beyond; draw on K–14 and industry resources that result in quality Career and Technical Education (CTE) coursework and ensure work-based learning experiences; and engage employers, community members, business partners, and mentors.
3. **Integrate supports:** coordinate both generic and specialized career planning processes with labor market data to maximize person-driven career planning and ensure case management, family engagement, tutoring, increased diploma opportunities, adaptive technologies, and financial planning.

To operationalize these three actions, the primary focus must be on youth and their families in combination with changes in public policies and financing. These actions require reshaping the dialogue about the student's capabilities and possibilities; sharing expertise among educators as well as state and community partners; and engaging with the business community. Many of the program and policy recommendations outlined in this brief are based on the findings of a 6-year research and demonstration study⁷ to improve the education and employment outcomes for 1,646 youth with disabilities⁸ receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI), with the engagement of their family members.

Action 1: Strengthen Expectations with Students, Families, Educators, and Community Partners

“ Kids are getting jobs who [before CaPROMISE] had IEPs that stated ‘work was not a viable goal.’ ”

TEACHER

Creating expectations that students can work and be economically self-sufficient must begin well before their 16th birthdays. Expectations and responsibilities must be shared by the student, the family, the K–12 system, and those who provide supports to students with disabilities. All stakeholders must share the belief that the student, regardless of their background and present capabilities, has the potential to work and the ability to be economically self-sufficient—with or without supports. Often students in special education programs are considered “less than capable” when it comes to academic performance, employability, and productivity.

What are our expectations for students with an identified disability? Are our expectations the same as for all students—complete high school with an earned diploma, engage in postsecondary education and/or career training, and eventually enter the workforce and achieve economic self-sufficiency? Or do we minimize our expectations and literally transition the student from one “special” program to another, hoping these experiences will enable them to move through our governmental systems and attain entry level employment?

Expectations must go beyond philosophical statements. Expectations should be clearly identified outcomes that are linked to school accountability. As an example, the California Community College K12 SWP utilizes a clear set of student level metrics that measure student success in expected high school accomplishments, CTE course completion, postsecondary education enrollment, and employment outcomes. These outcomes have significant merit for standardizing expectations and school accountability for all youth, including those with disabilities.

Too often, the very system of special education created to support these outcomes reinforces attitudes and practices that may hinder students. When a child is identified with a disability that will impact their educational and personal development, the focus is often on the child’s disability and their functional limitations, resulting in lower expectations regarding their abilities and opportunities. As the child enters K–12 education, they are often referred to a special education program and an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed. In theory, the IEP is intended to maximize resources that increase a student’s integration and success in school and society. In practice, the IEP too often outlines a student’s participation in programs and services that separate the student from

their school and postsecondary integration and success. The IEP often reinforces special education becoming a parallel service system to general education rather than a resource to support the goals and programs of general education. This is significant in that CTE and K12 SWP programs are located within the general education service system. Separating the student from the school's general education goals and programs further stigmatizes the student as "special." Special education as an alternative to general education creates barriers that limit access to major programs and minimizes the expectations society has to prepare youth for postsecondary education and employment.⁹

The IEP should be a strong statement of high expectations outlining a plan of goals, accommodations, and modifications shared by the student, family, and school, leading to a bright future. The IEP should not be the only roadmap to a myriad of programs and organizations that provide support for the student's disability and not necessarily the student's capabilities and interests. Seldom are discussions about the student's—and family's—expectations once they complete K–12 education. In this environment, the student and their family often focus on mitigating the real and perceived limitations of the student with only minimal discussions about preparing the student for life after K–12 education.

With most youth with disabilities, expectations for careers, work opportunities, and economic self-sufficiency are seldom discussed until the student is 16 or older. From the identification of a disabling condition and throughout the student's K–12 education, the primary focus is often mitigating limitations and conforming to the educational demands of formal education. There is thus often limited exposure to postsecondary education and training; understanding of money management; advocacy for needed career opportunities and supports; and development of essential soft skills for employment.

Reshaping expectations for the student with a disability and their family must begin at an early age. It starts with the development of a student-driven plan—*driven by the student and their family*—and supported by educators and community partners. This plan changes the IEP by focusing on the goals, accommodations, and supports necessary for a student to benefit from—rather than be excluded from—the program opportunities. Student access to the school's comprehensive CTE programs is essential. Moreover, the K–12 curriculum must include developing self-advocacy skills with the student and the family; creating a dialogue and experiences that explore post-high school career opportunities; and connecting the student and their family with successful adults with disabilities. Schools should begin career awareness with elementary and middle school programming where expectations and aspirations are born. Postponing career awareness for students with disabilities to the end of their high school experiences does not make sense. We must reshape the expectations of the student and their family members; educators (e.g., classroom and resource teachers); K–12 administrators (e.g., board and cabinet members; the superintendent; and department and program directors); and service providers (e.g., counselors, healthcare personnel, advocates, and community providers). The narrative needs to focus on capabilities, potential careers, and increasing self-sufficiency.

Action 2: Leverage Student Opportunities to Strengthen Work-Based Competencies

“ Not every family wants services at a certain time. Be patient—you can’t give up on them. Families expect that you will give up on them. If you don’t give up, then they’ll open up to you and give you a chance. We must establish and demonstrate trust.”

LEA STAFF

The rate for all students to earn a high school diploma in California is 83 percent compared to 66 percent for students with disabilities.¹⁰ As noted in the introduction, this disparity is further reflected in California’s unemployment rate for the general population compared to the rate of unemployment for persons with disabilities. Bringing the graduation and unemployment rates for persons with disabilities into alignment with the general population requires changes in public policy and expectations as well as refocused approaches to learning, including access to workforce development programming.

There are specific mandates through federal legislation to increase employment opportunities for students and adults with disabilities. These legislative mandates include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA).¹¹ The latter mandates that at least 15 percent of the federal funds for vocational rehabilitation, administered through the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), must be targeted to work-related transition efforts for high school students with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 22.

Similarly, there are programs offered through various legislative mandates at the state level in California. On October 9, 2013, California passed the Employment First legislation (2013, AB 1041) that indicates “it is the policy of the State that opportunities for integrated, competitive employment shall be given the highest priority for working age individuals with developmental disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disabilities.” The California Department of Education, Department of Developmental Services (DDS), and DOR administer, individually or in partnership, the WorkAbility programs, Transition Partnership programs, Paid Internships programs and Project Search efforts. These programs are targeted at youth with disabilities and provide them with work experiences and potentially competitive integrated employment. These disability mandates and programs should be viewed as *complimentary and supplemental* to the programs available to all youth (e.g., SWP, CTEIG), not as the *alternative* to them. Only then will specialized resources be leveraged with general resources and programs instead of replacing them.

There are concerted efforts at the state level to benefit all students that focus on strengthening the linkages between K–12 education, postsecondary education, and career sectors and industries. For example, in the K–12 system, CTE¹² programs and Work Experience Education¹³ courses of study ensure students are career and college ready by integrating academic and occupational knowledge; providing internships and employment options; and infusing instruction in workplace skills. In the postsecondary education system, the most recent initiative is the K12 SWP,¹⁴ which emphasizes cross-system partnerships among K–12 education, community colleges, and industry sectors to “support students’ successful transition from secondary education to postsecondary education to living-wage employment.” Finally, in the workforce system, the strategies and vision of the California Workforce Investment Boards are carried out through a network of One-Stop Career Centers which offer businesses qualified employees and provide job seekers with youth skill training and employment opportunities. While these efforts are available to many youth, there is inadequate recognition and targeted effort for youth with disabilities.

The intended goal for each of these programs and initiatives is to improve the post-high school outcome for all students—career and college ready as well as gainfully employed. Each program underscores the importance of collaboration across systems, partnerships with employers, workforce skill development, and work experiences. Operating in their individual silos, the impact is confined to selected student populations and programs. Leveraging the opportunities across these and other career development programs will expand the impact and benefit to all students, especially students with disabilities.

Action 3: Integrate Education and Community Supports for the Student

“I want you to have a conversation with the student and figure out what they want and provide services based on those conversations. I don’t want to give you a checklist because it seems like there is a point of being ‘done.’ You are never done—the work is constant, consistent, and ongoing.”

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Students with disabilities can succeed given expectations and opportunities plus individualized supports driven by the student’s needs. Students may require different and/or unique levels of support to access work experiences and career relevant education options. The level of support is determined by a variety of factors including the student’s abilities, community environment, and local and state resources. Identifying needed supports begins with a student-driven approach to fully understand the expectations, opportunities, and needs of the student and their family members. From this understanding, a network of resources, services, and supports can be integrated and tailored to meet the unique needs of the student. Furthermore, it is

essential that supports and services (e.g., transportation, travel training, job coaching, assistive technology, soft skills, accommodations, and educational coaches) are included as part of each student’s individualized plan. As schools move towards creating a college and career plan and portfolio for all students, the IEP can reclaim its focus and purpose: how that plan can be individualized and supplemented with integrated supports.

The student-driven approach may also uncover additional support needs for the student and/or family members that, if left unaddressed, can undermine the student’s pursuit of employment and self-sufficiency. These support needs encompass benefits management, financial planning, advocacy, and service referrals. Integrating supports is essential as no one program or service can address all the needs of the student and their family. These supports need to move from siloed and categorical funding to student-driven needs. Finally, integrating supports requires tapping into resources both within K–12 education and externally in other state and local programs as well as from both special education and general education. The supports are often available but limited by regulatory requirements and/or past practices and legacy systems.

Policy Recommendations for Career Development and Work Experiences

“I am most proud of accomplishing what people said I couldn’t do—get a job. I did it!”

STUDENT

The expectations and outcomes for students with disabilities are often unique and individualized. The skill sets for staff and teachers alongside measures of performance in our various systems for students with disabilities has created a “separate but equal” approach when considering changes in policies, practices, and outcomes. Workforce and career preparation programs in the K–12 system should be available to all students, including students with disabilities. This is not to say that parallel programs should be developed for students with and without disabilities; rather programs should be designed with all students in mind. The following are suggested policy recommendations to improve the career development opportunities and work experiences for students with disabilities within the workforce and career preparation programs for all students.

1. **Introduce careers and work to students at an early age; waiting until high school is too late.** Introduce the principles of work and careers, including soft skills, at an early age (i.e., the beginning of middle school). Content should encompass career exploration and pathways; postsecondary education and

- training; and the world of work. For students with an IEP, the expectations for transition should be addressed at a young age (i.e., elementary or middle school) using the principles of person-driven planning.
2. **Require inclusion of students with disabilities in career development programs and hold local education agencies (LEAs) accountable through program evaluation and performance measures.** As career development programs (e.g., career pathways, STEAM disciplines and careers, apprenticeships, and internships) are created in the K–12 curriculum, groups that are traditionally considered “low” achievers or nonparticipants must be included in all phases of program outreach, selection, participation, and completion. Program evaluation and performance measures must explicitly account for students with disabilities. It is recommended that a minimum targeted percentage of students with identified disabilities (i.e., between 10 percent and 20 percent of all enrolled students) be included in these programs. This will formalize and strengthen the legislative mandate and require LEAs to shape their programs to be inclusive of all students and reflective of the diverse learning abilities that exist in our schools.
 3. **Integrate students with disabilities in CTE State Plans.** Ensure students with disabilities are explicitly identified, enrolled, and integrated in the implementation of the California State Transition Plan for Career Technical Education including the federally funded Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Carl Perkins V) of 2019. This integration should include targeted enrollment and completion expectations, provision of necessary supports (i.e., career coaching, use of supporting technology, qualified instructors, and other individualized adaptations), and performance measures at the local and state levels. This should include the active participation by other state departments and their community partners such as the new Workforce Development Department, the Department of Rehabilitation, and the Department of Developmental Services.
 4. **Incorporate student participation in community-based service and work experiences into the measurement for the College/Career Readiness State Indicator reported on the California School Dashboard.** As performance standards are developed and implemented for K–12 schools, consider including service learning and community engagement; community-based work experiences; internships; and related career development expectations as either a separate standard or clearly integrated in the existing standards. Include these measures on the K–12 California School Dashboard. Creating an expectation and acknowledging accomplishments through the performance standards will elevate the importance of and increase recognition, visibility, and expectations for all students, including students with disabilities.

5. **Build in flexibility for LEAs to align programs and funding with students' needs, not with categories.** Identify and examine the various Department of Education, Department of Rehabilitation, California Community Chancellor's Office, Department of Developmental Services (DDS), Workforce Development Department, and related funding (e.g., WorkAbility; Transition Partnership Programs; DOR Student Services; Career Pathways; SWP and Guided Pathways; and DDS Paid Internships) that supports career development and work experiences for students with disabilities. Provide local flexibility for the LEAs to align funding with the needs and expectations of students rather than the categorical requirements of the funding mechanisms. This will increase local flexibility and align with the principle of a student-driven approach to career development.
6. **Collaborate and coordinate resources across LEAs; postsecondary education and training; community-based programs; and industries to meet students' needs and interests.** Promote the collaboration and coordination of the various community workforce development programs through the use of steering/advisory committees such as the Local Partnership Agreements (LPAs). This allows for planning, coordination, and innovation of a variety of local programming efforts, services, and funding resources with LEAs, County Offices of Education, community colleges, California Adult Education, universities, Workforce Development Boards, America's Job Center of California, the DOR, regional centers, adult service providers, and social services agencies. These collaborations will support the alignment of education, workforce partners, and skilled practitioners to maximize equity, equal access, and a student-driven focus for youth with disabilities. Shared data across agencies would benefit promoting accountability and improving programming among all stakeholder agencies.
7. **Apply SWP metrics and framework to students with disabilities.** Districts, schools, and community colleges should be held accountable for reporting SWP student level outcomes for students with disabilities. The SWP should be enforced through accountability of school effectiveness (i.e., the California School Dashboard) and funding (e.g., CTEIG, Specialized Secondary Programs, and SWP). Special education policy and program delivery should adopt the SWP metrics and framework for both designing intersegmental collaboration and focusing on student level outcomes. As this policy is changed, there must be staff development for administrators, teachers, and support staff with targeted attention to aligning the organizational culture to the new policies and outcomes.

These seven policy recommendations are designed to align systems with expectations and student needs (i.e., to prioritize students and their families over systems) and ensure there is equal engagement and successful performance for all students, including students with an identified disability. While these policies will strengthen

the engagement of these students, there remains a significant need to change the understanding and expectations of students with disabilities. These changing expectations must occur with the student's family members, teachers, support staff, and local and state administrators. There is a long-held perception that the student with a disability is less able and should be held to lower expectations (e.g., the awarding of a certificate of completion with the identification of the certificate track often occurring in middle school). Reframing policies with principles of equality and individualization for each student is the first step. Changing the expectations of the career and workforce development programs in the greater community is essential for each student, regardless of their abilities, and must be a continuous and focused approach for each of us.

Endnotes

- ¹ California Employment Development Department. (2019, October). *California Employment Highlights*. <https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/file/lfmonth/employment-highlights.pdf>
- ² U.S. Census Bureau. (2017). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>
- ³ National School Boards Association. *Six LifeReady Skills for Career, College and Success in Life: A Report of the Commission to Close the Skills Gap, 2019*. https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/2019%20Skills%20Gap%20Report_FINAL.pdf
- ⁴ See November 2018 data from the California Department of Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr18/yr18rel76.asp>
- ⁵ California School Dashboard. (2018, November). *College Career Indicator*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/documents/ccidashboardflyer.pdf>
- ⁶ Tucker, M., Guillermo, M., & Corona, V. (2019). "Career and work-based learning interventions for young recipients of Supplemental Security Income." *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 51(2): 145–157 at 147.
- ⁷ California Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (CaPROMISE) was funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. The CaPROMISE study was directed by the California Department of Rehabilitation in collaboration with 18 LEAs throughout California and the Interwork Institute at San Diego State University. The quotations in this brief were articulated by CaPROMISE participants, staff, and administrators. See McFarlane, F., & Guillermo, M. (2019). *Lessons Learned from CaPROMISE Youth and Their Families*. <https://www.capromise.org/sites/default/files/docs/CurrentInfo/CaPROMISE-Lessons-and-Actions-2019.pdf>
- ⁸ Youth were selected between the ages of 14 and 16. The control group had comparable demographic characteristics.
- ⁹ Guillermo, M., Tucker, M., Corona, V., McFarlane, F., & Jacobs, R. (2020). *Pursuing graduation: Differences in work experience supports for young SSI recipients pursuing diplomas or certificates* [Manuscript submitted for publication].
- ¹⁰ California Department of Education. (2017–2018). *Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate*. <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/CohRate.aspx?cds=00&agglvel=state&year=2017-18&initrow=&ro=y>
- ¹¹ Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC). <http://wintac-s3.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/topic-areas/ta01-pre-ets/WIOA-IDEA-Perkins-Indicators-WINTAC19-1122.pdf>
- ¹² California Department of Education. Career Technical Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/>
- ¹³ California Department of Education. Work Experience Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/we/>
- ¹⁴ California Community Colleges. *Overview of the K12 Strong Workforce Program*. <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Workforce-and-Economic-Development/K12-Strong-Workforce/Program-Overview>

Author Biographies

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