

# issue brief

## Evaluating the Implementation and Outcomes of Secondary Supported Employment Programs for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

Supported employment increasingly has become understood by professionals, parents, employers, and individuals with disabilities as a valuable way to provide essential support for jobseekers with disabilities who have never worked before or who are considered as not having the potential to succeed (e.g., Luecking, 2009; Wehman, Inge, Revell & Brooke, 2007).

This approach focuses on the use of a trained employment specialist working collaboratively with the business to enhance the training and productivity of the worker with a disability. This brief will outline a study involving school-based supported

employment programs in Virginia to generate new knowledge regarding the effectiveness of these programs as an employment-focused transition practice for youth with intellectual or other developmental disabilities.

### what we know

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Prior research documents the effectiveness of supported employment programs across various disability groups (Cimera, 2010; Bond, 2004; Hart, et. al., 2010; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Howlin, Alcock & Burke, 2005; Ottomanelli, Goetz, McGeough, Suris, Sippel, Sinnott, Wagner, Cipher, 2009; van Velzen, et. al., 2009); however, little rigorous empirical research has been done on the

extent to which this program is currently used in secondary transition programs, the actual supported employment practices in use, and the effectiveness of these programs. In evaluating these programs, the field must first be able to document the efficacy of these school-based supported employment programs by determining if school-based supported employment programs work.



Yet to fully understand the degree of success of these programs, and in the absence of randomized controlled trials in this area, this study goes beyond an analysis of basic outcomes by focusing on more complex questions which will guide our data collection and analysis. The questions include:

1 What are the key components of school-based supported employment programs?

- 2 How are these components actually implemented?
- 3 Under what conditions do the programs operate most effectively?
- 4 What is the relationship between the implementation of specific key program components to the ultimate employment outcomes generated by the supported employment programs?

## advancing knowledge and practice

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The sample for this study will be pulled from Virginia's 132 school divisions. A brief telephone survey identified school divisions providing supported employment services in the State. As a result, 27 divisions were identified to participate in the study. The analysis for the study will be on the high school level; therefore a sample will be pulled from a pool of 131 schools from each of the 27 divisions.

The Virginia Department of Education will assist in reviewing the information obtained from the 27 school divisions and sort each division by size (urban, suburban, and rural), and geographic location within the State. This will enable the study to address the extent to which supported employment services vary by size, location, and types of students served (Research Question 3). A final study sample will be constructed and based on our previous research experience, approximately 40-50 schools will be needed to support the correlation and regression statistical procedures to address Research Question 4.

As a result of the process to identify components and key performance indicators of school-based supported employment programs and the factors that affect their implementation, this study will lead to a reliable and validated fidelity scale. The High School Supported Employment Fidelity Scale will use the conceptual framework developed by Century, Rudnick, and Freeman (2010).

The framework uses a multi-step process that includes the identification of structural critical components of the program and the development of key process indicators based on the extent to which the critical components are adhered to during the implementation. We will initially categorize the critical components into five areas including (1) administrative leadership and supports; (2) individual program planning; (3) assessment; (4) job development and placement; and (5) job site training and follow-up.

Once the scale is developed and tested, transition personnel can use it to conduct self-assessments of their supported employment service programs and assist in evaluation and program development activities based on specific practices used in high schools across Virginia.

The support employment approach focuses on the use of a trained employment specialist working collaboratively with the business to enhance the training and productivity of the worker with a disability.

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