

# research brief

## Evaluating the Implementation and Outcomes of Secondary Supported Employment Programs for Students

### authors

Elizabeth Evans Getzel  
Colleen Rachel  
Stephanie Lau  
Katherine Wittig  
Christine Grauer

A 14-item School Based Supported Employment Fidelity Scale was piloted in 21 Virginia secondary schools representing urban, rural, and suburban school districts. The purpose of the study was to assess the policies and practices of supported employment services offered by these schools. The scale includes detailed guidelines for data collection and scoring to ensure consistency across secondary schools participating in the study.

## outline of research methods

---

The purpose of this study was to generate new knowledge regarding the effectiveness of school-based supported employment as an employment-focused transition practice for youth with intellectual or other developmental disabilities. An experimental investigation was conducted of the implementation of school-based supported employment, the factors that affect program implementation and the effectiveness of supported employment programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in secondary schools throughout Virginia.

Three research questions guided the design and implementation of the study: 1) To what extent do secondary schools in Virginia operate supported employment programs for transition age youth with disabilities? 2) What are the critical components and key performance indicators of school-based supported employment programs for transition age youth with disabilities? 3) To what extent are secondary schools in Virginia delivering quality supported employment services to transition age youth with disabilities?

## instrument development

---

The conceptual framework developed by Century, Rudnick, and Freeman (2010) was used to guide the development of a comprehensive School Based Supported Employment Fidelity Scale. Based on feedback obtained through the project's technical workgroup as well as secondary school educators who reviewed a preliminary draft for relevance, thoroughness, and ease of completion, the fidelity scale was refined

to include 14 Critical Structural Components. These items were further operationalized to include a set of specific key performance indicators. A list of specific data sources was used to systematically assess service delivery in different schools. Each of the 14 components has a detailed five point scoring system to maximize both the reliability and validity of the scale (see Table 1).

## sampling procedure

---

This exploratory study demonstrated tSpecial education personnel from 132 school districts were contacted by telephone to participate in a brief screening survey to determine whether they were providing supported employment services. Twenty-seven school districts indicated they offered supported employment services. From the 27 school districts identified as providing supported employment services, 123 high schools were identified as the sampling pool.

Using a randomized sampling procedure, 40 high schools representing urban, rural, and suburban school districts were then identified for the study. Special education administrators and transition personnel completed the scale during site visits with study staff. A total of 21 high schools completed the fidelity scale; the study was concluded at this point due to data saturation.

Table 1

<b>Critical Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
Age Appropriate Transition Assessment	Agency partners (e.g., school, VR) provide opportunities for students to assess various vocational interests, skills, abilities, and potential support needs in a variety of settings and businesses.
Student Access to Career Exploration	Students have access to career exploration activities to further postsecondary employment transition planning.
Student Participation in Supported Employment	The term “supported employment” means competitive work in integrated work settings consistent with the strengths, resources, and priorities of individuals with the most significant disabilities.
Administrative Support	Local school division administrative support is provided for vocational/employment services.
Qualified School Personnel	School staff has appropriate training and experience to conduct community based supported employment and has access to professional development opportunities devoted to supported employment.
Dedicated School Personnel	Dedicated school personnel provide only community based supported competitive employment.
Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Cooperative Agreement	Active collaboration occurs between the local school system, state vocational rehabilitation agency employment services organization, and long term supports provider.
Age Appropriate Job Development	Agency partners develop a formalized transition portfolio for the student after completing vocational assessments.
Job Site Training	School staff develops a comprehensive job analysis and job duty analysis for each employed student.
Plan for Systematic Instruction	School staff develops a comprehensive plan for systematic instruction for each employed student. Assistive Technology is included as necessary.
Transportation	Students utilize public transportation or other independent modes of transportation independent of the school system when reporting for work.
Competitive Employment Outcomes	Of those students employed in the community, they are employed for a minimum of 20 hours per week, and are earning pay and benefits commensurate with coworkers performing the same or similar work.
Student/Employer Satisfaction	Both the student and employer should express high levels of satisfaction with the employment outcome. A plan is in place to monitor continued satisfaction.
Long Term Supports	A long term supports plan is developed and includes the identification of a formal agreement with the long term support services organization, method for tracking services, and funding of support services.

## findings

---

Three primary themes emerged from the data collected. The first theme was the status of school-based supported employment. Under this theme there were three primary findings. School districts participating in the study used a different working definition of supported employment than vocational rehabilitation agencies. The description of supported employment services provided to students with ID/DD aligned more closely with work based or community based work experiences. These secondary schools were using more of a hybrid model of school and community based instruction (e.g. unpaid internships, work experiences, cooperative programs). The largest challenge to implementing school-based supported employment programs was due to funding cuts and limited resources.

The second theme was around the services provided to students with ID/DD. Students with ID/DD who were placed in employment sites did not have access to intensive job site

training or ongoing supports. Some of the schools in the research sample paid students small stipends in various types of work experiences; but for most of the schools involved in providing work experience, the students were volunteering at sites. Schools reported that for students who were employed, many worked less than 20 hours per week. One of the biggest challenges facing schools in providing employment related services was the lack of funding for transportation training and to provide transportation to community work sites.

The last theme that emerged from the findings was collaboration. All of the participating schools have partnership agreements with Virginia's vocational rehabilitation agency. Schools reported they regularly collaborate with vocational rehabilitation counselors, but the level and frequency of their collaboration varied across the state.

## implications for the field

---

Prior research documents the effectiveness of supported employment programs, yet little rigorous empirical research has been done on the extent to which these programs are currently used in secondary transition programs, the actual supported employment practices in use, and the effectiveness of these programs. The present study contributes to filling this knowledge gap by providing an examination of supported employment interventions as implemented by a diverse sample of school districts.

It is anticipated that transition personnel will ultimately be able to use the School-Based Supported Employment Fidelity Scale to conduct self-assessments of their supported

employment programs, and also as a technical assistance and training tool to assist with targeted evaluation and program development activities. However, providing employment services in integrated, community settings is an increasing challenge for school divisions in Virginia. Educators completing the fidelity scale expressed frustration with being unable to provide the level of employment services as in the past due to funding cuts and limited resources. Further research involving implementation of the School-Based Supported Employment Fidelity Scale in other states is recommended to determine if the results obtained in Virginia are common to school districts across the country.

## references

---

Century, J., Rudnick, M., & Freeman, C.  
(2010). A framework for measuring fidelity  
of implementation: A foundation for shared  
language and accumulation of knowledge.  
*American Journal of Evaluation*, 31(2), 199-218.

## authors

---

Elizabeth Evans Getzel — Virginia Commonwealth University  
Colleen Rachel — Virginia Commonwealth University  
Stephanie Lau — Virginia Commonwealth University  
Katherine Wittig — Virginia Commonwealth University  
Christine Grauer — Virginia Commonwealth University