

The Way to Work: Translating Knowledge to Improve Employment Success

The Rehabilitation Services Administration awarded five-year grants to state VR agencies to identify and demonstrate evidence-based practices for providing work-based experiences for students with disabilities. Five state VR agencies in five states received awards: California, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Vermont. The University of Maryland and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. are implementation and evaluation partners with Maryland DORS for the Maryland project, called *Way2Work Maryland*.

Way2Work Maryland is a five year statewide initiative designed to evaluate promising school-to-work transition practices in concert with specific provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Indeed, WIOA represents an opportunity to address longstanding challenges to improving the adult employment outcomes of students and youth with disabilities by encouraging early vocational rehabilitation (VR) case initiation, as well as VR service funds spent on students before they have exited school. Both of these activities have proven to improve employment outcomes. Further, WIOA contains specific provisions for Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) that include work-based learning experiences, an intervention identified by research as the strongest predictor of adult employment for students with disabilities. This Brief describes how *Way2Work Maryland* incorporates components of WIOA with additional evidence based transition practice in order to increase post-school success of students with disabilities.

Translating knowledge about effective transition service

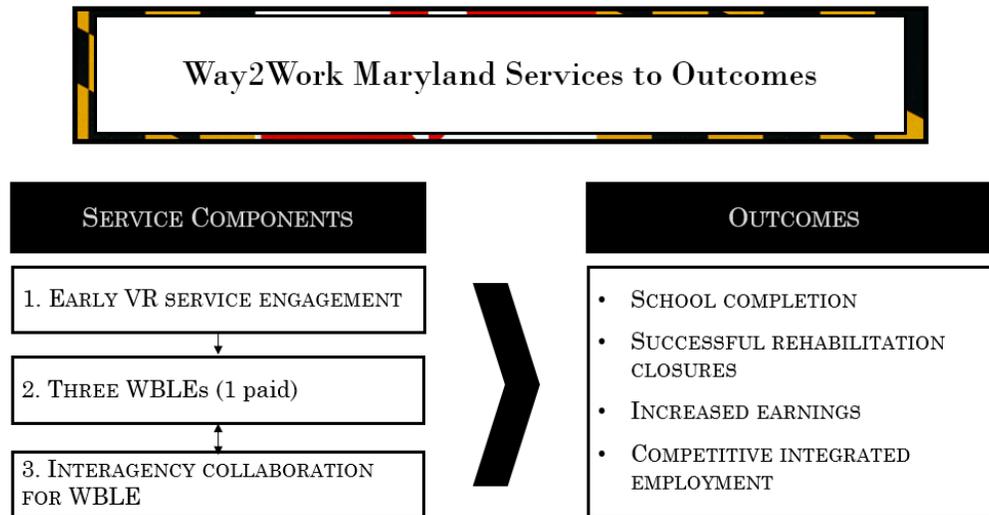
Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) partnered with the University of Maryland and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. to implement and evaluate the *Way2Work Maryland* intervention featuring empirically supported components robustly associated with post-school success for students with disabilities. These components include:

- 1. Early engagement in DORS services.** Pre-ETS are initiated no later than the junior year for students on a diploma track, or the second to last school year prior to projected school exit for students on a certificate track.
- 2. A minimum of three (3) work-based learning experiences,** these experiences include:
 - a. At least two (2) unpaid work-based learning experiences which allow the student to spend meaningful time in an employer's work environment to learn aspects of potential job tasks and "soft skills" required in the workplace. The placement is based on a Work-Based Learning Experience (WBLE) agreement with the employer. No wages are paid by the employer, but it could include subsidized employment, volunteer placement, and unpaid internships.
 - b. At least one (1) paid work-based learning experience which is defined as a time-limited work performed in an employer's workplace that may be in conformance with an existing job description or may be customized work assignments. The work-based learning experience is negotiated with the employer and based on a WBLE agreement. Wages are paid by the employer.
- 3. Strategic and active collaboration and coordination of services.** Local inter-agency teams are composed of representatives from DORS, the schools, Community Rehabilitation Providers, American Job Centers, post-secondary institutions and other entities which may support achievement of student employment and career goals. The charge to the teams is to actively collaborate on behalf of individual students to facilitate the development of work-based learning experiences and paid employment. Teams meet regularly, but no less than monthly.

Scope of Way to Work Maryland

Way2Work Maryland is being implemented at 8 diverse school districts in the state. A total of 400 students are recruited for participation with half randomized to services as usual and half receive the enhanced services associated with the project. Each implementation site receives targeted individualized technical assistance and training to assure that the components of the intervention are implemented with fidelity, that is, in the same way at all 8 project sites. The project will measure and compare post-school outcomes for the two study groups, including: 1) secondary school completion and post-secondary enrollment; 2) VR case service receipt and closure status 3) wage and hour earnings in the six months after project enrollment and 4) post-school employment consistent with students' career goals (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Improved employment success

One intent of WIOA is to improve service delivery and employment outcomes for students and youth with disabilities. Ultimately, *Way2Work Maryland* will provide additional evidence about optimum circumstances for using Pre-ETS to facilitate work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities. That is, we will better understand how, when, and under what conditions students can expect to successfully transition from school to competitive employment and careers.

WAY2WORK MARYLAND IS FUNDED THROUGH A COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT WITH THE MARYLAND DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES (DORS) FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, REHABILITATION SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (RSA), GRANT H4213160006. THE CONTENTS OF THIS PUBLICATION DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE POLICY OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, AND YOU SHOULD NOT ASSUME ENDORSEMENT BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

THE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM RECEIVES 100% OF ITS FUNDING THROUGH A GRANT FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FOR THIS PROJECT. FOR FEDERAL FISCAL YEARS FY 17 TO FY 21, THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF GRANT FUNDS AWARDED WERE \$7,519,895.

THE DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE ON THE BASIS OF RACE, COLOR, SEX, AGE, NATIONAL ORIGIN, RELIGION OR DISABILITY IN MATTERS AFFECTING EMPLOYMENT OR IN PROVIDING ACCESS TO PROGRAMS.

