

Service Provider Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Partnership & Collaboration

Via of the Lehigh Valley (Pennsylvania): Partnership with Local Schools to Provide Customized Employment

Background

Via of the Lehigh Valley is a CRP headquartered in Bethlehem, PA. Since 2008, Via and local high schools have provided customized employment services so that transition-age students graduate into well-matched, meaningful careers. Via's transition program is supported by funds from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The energy of students and their families has also driven the search for innovative employment services.

Via's work with schools began with hosting weekend trainings for families, sponsored by the Pennsylvania DD Council. Families learned systems navigation and advocacy skills, and followed up with special education directors at their children's high schools to advocate for improvements in employment services.

School administrators then contacted Via about providing employment services to their students with IDD. Via's employment team responded by presenting their customized employment service approach at schools and transition fairs.

Through this outreach, Via's employment team developed contracts to serve transitioning students.

Implementation

Employment specialists currently work with 18 students from eight different high schools, ranging in ages from 16 to 21, whose families have approached Via for employment services. Individual high schools support the employment specialists to spend up to 80 hours on the discovery process with each student: <http://products.brookespublishing.com/The-Job-Developers-Handbook-P289.aspx>.

The employment specialists complete a vocational profile that details their findings from the discovery process. The specialists may recommend schedule changes to accommodate courses that support the students' work interests and the acquisition of employment skills. For example, one vocational profile found that the student had strong interest in media and advertising and worked well in an office environment. The employment specialist recommended that the student's schedule be altered to accommodate courses in accounting

and other subjects relevant to a job with a marketing firm. This strategy led to a full-time position with a marketing firm.

Local high schools also fund the employment specialists to meet with employers and secure work experiences that match students' abilities and interests. Via's coordinator of transition services then joins each student's IEP team to support further work opportunities and preparation for employment.

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With continued funding from local high schools, Via assists students to look for summer jobs or other paid and unpaid work while in school. The IEP team also helps students to apply for VR, IDD, or autism services, and to get assistance with benefits planning.

Impact

VIA's customized employment program has expanded possibilities for students previously considered unemployable in the community. The program supports a significant investment of time for employment specialists to help students develop their ideal conditions for employment, and positions young people solidly for future career opportunities.

Students' families have been pleased that Via's program helps students access a wide array of work experiences. These successes have ensured the stability of customized employment services through local high schools' continued partnership with Via. In spring of 2014, Via helped four students graduate from high school with full-time and part-time jobs, and supported another student to start a small business.

Suggestions for Replication

- » Create partnerships with local schools to deliver and fund collaborative transition services.
- » Engage families in demanding better employment preparation services from their school systems.
- » Use strategies such as customized employment to guide students' goal development and work experience while they are still in school.
- » Regularly attend IEP meetings to support additional career preparatory experiences, as well as the connection to adult services.

For more information on this practice contact thinkwork@umb.edu



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