Leveraging Federal Legislation to Work Smarter, Not Harder:
Improving Outcomes for Students With Disabilities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study highlights commonalities relative to post-school outcomes for students with disabilities across special education, career and technical education, and vocational rehabilitation. In Willow Creek High School, students with disabilities are not engaging in activities to help them achieve positive post-school outcomes. A new principal must find a way to build cross-discipline and interagency collaboration while making sure the different entities are effectively using data to inform programming decisions. The challenges of and opportunities for improving career and technical education programs, inclusive of students with disabilities, while ensuring rigorous school-to-career transition services, are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, students with disabilities have a long history of poor outcomes compared to their same-age, peers without disabilities (Alverson et al., 2010; Lipscomb et al., 2017). Research has also identified vital experiences that increase the likelihood of students successfully obtaining competitive integrated employment. For example, studies have shown that students with disabilities enrolled in career and technical education (CTE) coursework were more likely to obtain positive secondary education and employment outcomes (Jeon et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2014/2015). Moreover, students with disabilities who were CTE concentrators (i.e., completed two or more course credits in one career program of study or career cluster) were more likely to graduate within four years and be employed after graduation in comparison to those without secondary CTE programs (Theobald et al., 2018/2019). Furthermore, recent research found that 58% of states (n = 29) had an increase in the number of students with disabilities participating in CTE while in high school (Harvey & Hee, 2022). Students who participate in CTE classes are also more likely to graduate from high school (Dougherty et al., 2018). Similarly, participation in vocational rehabilitation (VR) services has increased positive post-school engagement. Poppen and colleagues (2017) reported that students with disabilities who participated in at least four VR services were more successful in post-school employment than students who received only one VR service. Understanding the intersection between special education services, CTE, and VR services in secondary school programming is critical to ensure that students with disabilities have a seamless transition to adulthood.

Public laws (P.L.) govern services designed, in part, to improve education and post-secondary outcomes. These laws include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; P. L. 101-476); Rehabilitation Act, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA; P. L. 113-128); Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA; P. L. 114-95); and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, (Perkins V; P. L. 115-224). Although these Acts share a broad common purpose – preparing today's youth for tomorrow's workforce – as so often happens with federal legislation and corresponding regulations, each Act (a) requires implementation of unique activities; (b) applies unique definitions; and (c) specifies special measures for accountability. These unique requirements of each Act can result in the people responsible for implementing the regulations working in isolation, having competing purposes, and duplicating data collection efforts as they attempt to fulfill federal requirements. Nevertheless, these four statutes play essential and complementary roles in guiding the education of the country's future workforce and detailing the academic, technical, and employability skills young people need to be successful in adult roles after they leave high school (Cushing et al., 2019). Creating a coherent