



# Engaging Youth with Disabilities in the Delivery of Pre-Employment Transition Services

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*A Resource for Centers for Independent Living and other Grantees*

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## Introduction

When it was signed into federal law in 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) brought with it some major changes to the landscape of publicly-funded employment services for people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> One of the largest changes came from a new mandate requiring state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies to allocate 15% of their federal grant allotment to Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to support in-school youth with disabilities who are *potentially eligible* for VR services. As a result, many state VR agencies have dramatically expanded their target population and supported the development of a wide range of programmatic approaches to providing Pre-ETS. As these approaches have been implemented, relatively little has been written on how students with disabilities are effectively engaged in delivering these services. The purpose of this brief is to provide state and local professionals and grantees supporting the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities with an overview of Pre-ETS, some lessons learned from the authors' perspective, and considerations for student engagement in Pre-ETS planning and implementation.

## What are Pre-ETS?<sup>2</sup>

In simple terms, Pre-ETS are a set of services that complement school-provided transition services to support the positive employment outcomes of students with disabilities. They are a logical extension of the intent of lawmakers to orient federal disability policy toward the common aim of competitive integrated employment (CIE). In service of this aim, Pre-ETS are intended to support

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<sup>1</sup> Although the WIOA alone is frequently cited to describe recent changes to the workforce development system, many of these changes came through direct amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that were packaged together with the WIOA. For brevity in this brief and others, you may still see these changes and mandates referred to as things outlined in the WIOA.

<sup>2</sup> Some great resources on Pre-ETS have been developed since their inception nearly ten years ago through the WIOA. Many of these resources have been developed or are housed by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C; to access these resources, visit <https://transitionta.org/topics/pre-ets/>). If you are new to the topic of Pre-ETS, the NTACT:C website is a great starting place.



CIE outcomes for in-school youth with disabilities by providing support related to five key activities: job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, postsecondary education counseling, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy. Although such services have long been provided in some form or another for youth with disabilities, the WIOA unified these services under the umbrella term of Pre-ETS. Given the tremendous amount of public funding devoted to these services and the historically dismal post-school employment outcomes of youth with disabilities, it is a topic that anyone invested in disability employment issues should know about.

#### Did You Know?

The US Department of Education's Budget Summary for the 2023 fiscal year detailed a request for nearly \$4 billion in funding to support VR state grants to 56 US states and territories. If approved, this funding means that somewhere in the neighborhood \$600 million could be allocated to support Pre-ETS across the country in the 2023-2024 fiscal year!

### How are Pre-ETS Provided?

The WIOA provided some highly inclusive parameters for the target population receiving Pre-ETS. These parameters provide that Pre-ETS recipients are:

- a) students in a recognized education program (e.g., public school, private school, home school, or residential program),
- b) no younger than age 14<sup>3</sup> and no older than age 21,
- c) who have a disability, and
- d) are *potentially eligible* for VR services.

Students with disabilities are defined under the law as either a student (a) found eligible for special education or (b) meeting the much broader definition of disability under the Rehabilitation Act. The language of *potentially eligible* alludes to the fact that youth must have a disability but do not need to undergo a VR eligibility process to receive services. This feature of Pre-ETS effectively eliminates the need for a process that has historically presented a barrier to youth participation in VR services. Taken together, the criteria for participation in Pre-ETS opens the door to a large group of students who may have not otherwise had ready access to such services. Another important aspect of Pre-ETS is that they are not intended to replace transition services already provided by schools. VR agencies must provide Pre-ETS to students in collaboration with schools at the state level, through partnerships between state VR offices and state education agencies, and at the local level, through partnerships with local education agencies (LEA).

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<sup>3</sup> This lower age boundary is mandated to align with the age in which transition under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act officially begins in a given state. For some, this age is 13.



## Required Pre-ETS Activities

Given the inclusive parameters of Pre-ETS mandates, it's no surprise that there has been a lot of variation in how they are provided across US states and territories. This variation includes differences in who typically provides services and the nature of the services themselves.<sup>4</sup> The service providers tend to fall into three categories: VR agency staff, traditionally contracted providers (e.g., community rehabilitation providers), and non-traditionally contracted providers (e.g., teachers in partner schools and LEAs). The use of non-traditionally contracted providers reflects the reality that required Pre-ETS spending caused dramatic shifts in VR-funded service provision. In schools and LEAs, such shifts have led to school- and district-level positions funded partly or entirely through Pre-ETS. Other non-traditionally contracted providers may include Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and other disability-focused non-profits that may not have previously had many ties to funded service provision in collaboration with schools.

Having five Pre-ETS activities required by law might lead one to believe these activities look very similar from one place to the next. Rather than a prescriptive set of services, however, these Pre-ETS activities function more like service domains. This is not only because of their breadth as service areas but also because states must translate these five activities into specific services that meet the needs of students with disabilities while fitting within the landscape of school-provided transition services. Generally speaking, these five activities are recognized as follows:

**Job Exploration Counseling.** For many transition-age youth, a vision of their employment future is not as clear as it could be. As many have experienced through adolescence, it is common to be uncertain about one's career trajectory and the steps needed to reach one's employment goals. For youth with disabilities, it is especially important to solidify this vision of their employment goals to ensure access to a continuum of services over their school career to support their progress. Job exploration counseling may include one-on-one or group-based services to gain knowledge and engage in exploratory activities to better understand career options and specific career paths.

### Lessons From the Field: Job Exploration

If anything can be learned about this topic, it's that most people need direct support to explore career options. After all, relatively few people feel certain of where they will form their professional identities. In the authors' experience, some caution should be exercised in job exploration services. Regardless of who is providing job exploration counseling or how they are providing it, it is critical that these services support youth individually. There may be benefits in providing general services that concentrate on job exploration strategies (e.g., using online career interest inventories or job posting services). Yet, such support works best if it builds towards a person's individualized job exploration (e.g., using career interest inventory findings to explore a particular job of interest). It has also been discovered that for job exploration counseling to be truly effective, it must exist within a continuum of services that lead youth into hands-on engagement in work-based learning that aligns with their preferences, interests, and strengths.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on state differences in implementing Pre-ETS, check out the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on VR Practices and Youth 2018 brief by Miller, Sevak, and Honeycutt, titled "State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies' Early Implementation Experiences with Pre-Employment Transition Services" at <https://www.mathematica.org/publications/state-vocational-rehabilitation-agencies-early-implementation-experiences-with-pre-employment>



**Work-Based Learning Experiences.** Of the five Pre-ETS activities, work-based learning (WBL) experiences are perhaps the most prescriptive, requiring the facilitation of experiential learning opportunities during or after school hours, within or outside the traditional school setting. These experiences have been interpreted broadly by state VR agencies and Pre-ETS providers, ranging from structured volunteer opportunities and internships to paid, community-based employment and apprenticeships. Some professionals have dealt with a relative lack of resources and a pronounced need for WBL experiences in a local area by directing Pre-ETS funding to create school-based enterprises (e.g., a student-staffed coffee cart for students, faculty, and school staff). Such endeavors function as micro-businesses within a school setting and have become quite popular recently. However, it is important to understand that school-based enterprises have some significant limitations<sup>5</sup> and, if used, should exist within a continuum of individualized and community-based employment experiences.

#### Lessons From the Field: Work-Based Learning (WBL)

When it comes to meeting one's career goals, WBL is the author's absolute favorite. It's practical and resonates with many peoples' professional journeys, whether they have a disability or not. What better way to explore your professional future than to have a full range of opportunities to learn from successes and failures in the working world? Unfortunately, the authors have also seen that access to robust WBL experiences is something that relatively few students with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities, find before they leave school. One of the most complicated aspects of providing high-quality WBL is that it demands highly effective collaboration across agencies. From meeting the needs of students who need more intensive support to be successful on the job to developing relationships with employers, many moving parts are involved in getting students the WBL opportunities they need and deserve. The authors have found that WBL opportunities are at their best when they are supported by local professionals collaborating to map how service provision operates. Tools like a *Flow of Services* document can catalyze planning and important conversations about a shared vision for WBL across school-based professionals and local service providers.<sup>6</sup> Equitable student access to WBL is not required by law, but it is an ideal that professionals should unite to support.

**Postsecondary Education Counseling.** For students with and without disabilities, moving from high school to college or some other form of postsecondary career training is a natural progression toward meeting one's post-school employment goals. Postsecondary education counseling may be provided one-on-one or in group settings like job exploration counseling. The typical focus is to provide students with the support they need to explore general or specific options for continuing their education after high school. Such support may range from knowledge-building exercises to experiential learning opportunities involving touring college campuses. Like all other Pre-ETS, postsecondary education counseling provided through VR funding should complement, not replace, what is already available in a given school or school district. This may mean active communication and collaboration with school guidance counselors and related professionals to

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, school based enterprises, as a vehicle for WBL, are not typically tailored to the individual employment goals of students and lack an evidence base supporting their linkage to positive postschool employment outcomes for participants.

<sup>6</sup> For more on collaborating across agencies to align services for students and Flow of Services, including a detailed example, visit <https://transitionta.org/pre-ets-guide/> to explore the "Pre-Employment Transition Services: A Guide for Collaboration Among State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and Education Partners"



ensure Pre-ETS are working well alongside other supports being provided and that students are accessing this continuum of services.

### Lessons From the Field: Postsecondary Education Counseling

Like other Pre-ETS activities, postsecondary education counseling has had a way of making so much practical sense to us as professionals. For many of you reading this brief, college or some form of training was a necessary stepping stone on your way to a fulfilling career. As such, the authors have found that this activity area both normalizes and affirms that college or postsecondary career training in some form is one of the most natural things that youth with disabilities can engage in to support their post-school employment goals. The authors have observed a professional tendency to consider this activity for students who seem to be on a traditional trajectory toward four-year colleges and universities, but this is a Pre-ETS activity that can and should be offered regardless of whether or not a student is on a *traditional* path. The most important lesson the authors have learned is that the students served through this activity will reflect the nature of the services themselves. Suppose those services do not consider less traditional options for postsecondary education like technical college programs, inclusive postsecondary college programs, etc. In that case, it serves to reason that many students will not receive the support they need.

**Workplace Readiness Training.** Perhaps the broadest of all Pre-ETS activities, workplace readiness training refers generally to the support of knowledge and skills that students need to be successful in the workplace. Workplace readiness training may be provided one-on-one or in group settings and include skill and knowledge-building opportunities in soft skills (e.g., professional communication) and hard skills (e.g., the skills and knowledge needed to pass a welding certification exam). Like other Pre-ETS activity areas, student strengths and needs in workplace readiness vary greatly. School personnel and Pre-ETS providers should collaborate to ensure students have access to generalized workplace readiness training and individualized support according to student employment goals.

### Lessons From the Field: Work Readiness Training

From the authors' perspective, workplace readiness training has been, historically, complicated for people with disabilities. Far too many disabled people have spent lifetimes getting *ready* for work. In the authors' experience, effective workplace readiness training demands that professionals embrace an important truth: there can be great benefits in workplace readiness training, but very few people are ever fully *ready* for work. In other words, workplace readiness training should never be a set of services that stand between community-based employment experiences for students with disabilities. The best workplace readiness training we have been involved in considers the individualized skills and knowledge students need to meet their employment goals. Like job exploration counseling, there may be some generalized approaches to workplace readiness that have broad benefits for large groups of students, but at some point, attention should be given to individualized workplace readiness training. The social validity of training efforts must also be considered. For example, soft skills may especially carry the baggage of dominant cultural norms (e.g., making eye contact and a firm handshake as necessary to "professionalism"). Workplace readiness training should fit within students' wants, not professional perceptions of what they *need*.

**Instruction in Self-Advocacy.** Self-advocacy is perhaps best understood as a component skill of self-determination for students with disabilities. As such, self-advocacy works in tandem with skills like self-awareness and problem-solving to aid students in directing their own lives. In employment settings, strong self-advocacy skills and knowledge of their rights may aid students in



requesting reasonable accommodations on the job and otherwise in effectively speaking on their own behalf to ensure employment success. A common approach to providing instruction in self-advocacy for youth with disabilities who are still in school is to focus on support that helps them take a more active role in their own education (e.g., directing one's own individualized education program, IEP). Instruction in self-advocacy is one of the most likely Pre-ETS to be provided in group settings, focused typically on the general awareness and skills of advocating for oneself as a person with a disability. It is especially important that instruction in self-advocacy is provided in a way that meets the expressed needs of students in this domain and leverages the insight of the disability community on exercising self-advocacy to meet those needs.

### **Lessons From the Field: Self-Advocacy**

When the authors began creating and implementing Pre-ETS programs in 2015, self-advocacy was one of their team's most natural activity areas at a CIL. Providing support to students to learn about disability rights and history, school and employment accommodation processes, and the ins and outs of advocating for themselves was something the authors had already been involved in for quite some time. To be sure, it also seemed to be an activity area in which professionals, on the whole, seemed to be a bit more clear. As the WIOA has aged, they have learned some important lessons about providing self-advocacy instruction for students with disabilities. Undoubtedly, the most effective self-advocacy support we've implemented comes directly from young people with disabilities. At this point, the authors do not even consider approaches to self-advocacy that are not peer mentorship based. Navigating the process of advocating for yourself about a part of your identity that you may or may not be in touch with is a sensitive matter. When their team teaches students about self-advocacy, they teach them the essence of the Independent Living philosophy: they (a) are the best experts on their own lives and (b) have a right to direct their own lives. For this reason, such messaging coming from older adults without disabilities is something that feels a bit out of sync with the intent of providing self-advocacy instruction. The authors have also learned, however, that facilitating peer-led self-advocacy instruction is something that may be new to many professionals. Although there may be some growing pains, they can confidently say that it is highly worthwhile to plan for how peer-led self-advocacy instruction can be provided.

## **Student Engagement as Access to Pre-ETS**

Student engagement has been described in different ways and many different contexts for young adult learners. At its simplest, one way of viewing student engagement related to Pre-ETS is the extent of students' physical access to services. Although a given state's investment in Pre-ETS is likely to be a fairly substantial amount of funding, it is certainly not without its limitations. While it may not be reasonable to expect that every student included in the target population for these services will access them, it is highly important to identify categorical exclusions of students. For example, in some places, Pre-ETS providers may work with students in the local school district based on referrals from VR counselors or teachers. Such referral processes may function to keep certain groups of students from engaging in services because of breakdowns in communication during the referral process.

In other places, professionals serving transition-age youth may be unaware of Pre-ETS availability and lack relationships with local VR staff or providers. School-based professionals should not wait





for an invitation for their students to participate in Pre-ETS and instead, focus on building collaborative relationships and advocating for the support that their students need.

In places where Pre-ETS are already being provided, it is also important to consider the unmet Pre-ETS needs of students and advocate to ensure they receive the services they need most. These needs may vary greatly across students and settings, but some general themes in unmet needs may be worth noting. For example, transition services in a local school district may not include WBL experiences for students, and Pre-ETS offerings in that same district may also exclude WBL. For Pre-ETS providers and school-based professionals, staffing, transportation, and expertise in facilitating employment experiences may be barriers to providing WBL locally. Knowing that in-school employment experience predicts post-school employment for students with disabilities,<sup>7</sup> it is critical that schools and Pre-ETS providers work together to ensure student access to such opportunities.

### ***Student Engagement as Active Involvement in Pre-ETS***

Another way of thinking about student engagement is to consider student participation in services once they access Pre-ETS. This view of student engagement brings this topic front and center into a conversation that has spanned decades in education. A common approach to understanding what contributes to students being engaged in their own learning is to view student engagement as comprising three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. Students who are engaged behaviorally are actively involved in the physical act of learning, while cognitively engaged students are actively learning. Emotionally engaged students are connected to their learning and motivated to continue. When students are engaged across all three dimensions, learning and the impact of learning are maximized.

While these dimensions of student engagement are not necessarily observable in the same ways, they provide some critical implications for evaluating the impact of Pre-ETS over time. Regardless of who is providing Pre-ETS to students or how these services are being provided, there are some key indicators and questions of interest regarding the impact of Pre-ETS that should be common to professional stakeholders at the state and local levels:

1. **Knowledge Gains:** What data sources indicate the knowledge gains of students engaged in Pre-ETS?
2. **Skill Gains:** What data sources indicate the skill gains of students engaged in Pre-ETS?
3. **Service Satisfaction:** What data sources indicate students' satisfaction in Pre-ETS?
4. **Student Outcomes:** What data sources indicate the impact of Pre-ETS on the post-school employment outcomes of engaged students?

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<sup>7</sup> For more on predictors of postschool employment success, visit the NTACTION website at <https://transitionta.org/topics/employment/>



Asking questions about the data sources illuminating these student engagement indicators is an important first step. With these data, Pre-ETS stakeholders can work together to determine (a) how well students are being engaged in Pre-ETS once they access the services and (b) how these services impact the postschool outcomes of participating students. Given the importance of such data and the windows they provide for evaluation, many VR and education agencies have developed data-sharing agreements at the state and local levels to pull together disparate data sources (e.g., student Pre-ETS participation data matched with postschool outcome data).

However, there are still other states and communities where Pre-ETS are being provided with little or no evaluation of student engagement or the long-term impact of that engagement for participating students. Professional stakeholders can and should engage in evaluating student engagement and the impact of Pre-ETS to ensure that publicly-funded employment services for youth with disabilities are reaching their fullest potential. Like student access to Pre-ETS, professional advocacy may be necessary to prompt local agencies to consider data reflecting active involvement's impact on these services. As a professional, it can be discouraging when things are not happening how they could or should happen to maximize positive student outcomes. Rather than a sign of coordination in service delivery being hopelessly flawed, however, such circumstances point to the need for professionals to help the people around them see the present reality alongside an innovative vision for the future.

## **Conclusion**

In its attempts to bring agencies out of silos and work collaboratively to support CIE outcomes for youth with disabilities, WIOA dramatically changed the landscape of service provision through Pre-ETS. There have been marked differences in how professionals have responded to these changes at the state and local levels. For all professionals interested in supporting the positive postschool employment outcomes of youth with disabilities, a general understanding of Pre-ETS is essential. From this foundation, collaboration that meaningfully attends to students' engagement in Pre-ETS is an undertaking that all professional stakeholders should engage in at the state and local levels. Collecting and responding to objective evidence of physical access to Pre-ETS and the impacts of student engagement in these services are particularly worthwhile endeavors. For lasting change to occur within publicly-funded systems supporting youth with disabilities, it requires the active involvement of all stakeholders, informed by multiple vantages on the barriers and opportunities to ensure CIE is a reality for all youth with disabilities.

