



Brick by Brick: Building Brevard County's talent pipeline through work-based learning experiences

May 2019

The passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014 established a mandate for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) to strengthen local partnerships with school districts. VR, which is within the Department of Education, has enhanced its collaboration with schools to allow access to services to students with disabilities who are still in high school to help them transition to employment and postsecondary education.

One way that students can access VR's services before completing school is through a work-based learning experience (WBLE). While participating in a WBLE, students spend their time in a real work environment, taking on workplace responsibilities, acquiring skills and gaining insight into their own work interests and the requirements of careers. A WBLE also requires that students take an active part in the program, learning new skills and evaluating themselves on their progress. The WBLEs are open to students with disabilities aged 14-21 who are still in school.

In 2018, VR and the Home Builders and Contractors Association (HBCA) of Brevard County, and other partners created WBLEs that took place over the summer. Students from five Brevard County public high schools participated. Five employers from the association offered WBLEs and two service provider agencies working with VR helped match the students with the employers. Each student worked with a VR counselor to choose a service provider and interviewed with the employers offering WBLEs through that provider. Once they were matched, they participated in the WBLEs over two three-week sessions. Students were given a variety of specialized construction, maintenance and clerical tasks, often taking on a variety of tasks each day. Some became interested in learning specific skills, such as welding, and in pursuing careers in the construction field, and at least one student plans to enter into an apprenticeship upon graduation. The partners compiled a video showcasing these work opportunities at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvRTu6byxgY&app=desktop>

Lessons Learned:

Most often, a local VR counselor and an employer form a partnership to create one or more WBLEs at one or more of the employers' sites. However, the partnership between VR and the HBCA, a trades association, was based on a sector strategy – a plan to address the needs of an industry with a high demand for workers with specialized skills. The home-building and

contracting industry offers potentially high wages and is currently experiencing high demand for such workers, as well as a looming skills gap as many workers in these fields prepare to retire in the next seven to ten years. For branding and marketing purposes, this partnership was given a name that captures the spirit of sustaining the construction industry through this sector strategy: “Brevard Internships in Construction Knowledge – Brick by Brick building our talent pipeline.”

To increase the students’ sense of responsibility for their work, the employers assigned some more experienced students greater leadership roles. Although the \$11 per hour was a strong motivator for many students, the increased responsibility also improved students’ motivation and work performance.

The WBLEs offered students the opportunity to take on many types of work at an apprentice level. They also introduced employers to new people to add to their talent pipeline. The partners considered the WBLEs successful and plan to offer three times as many opportunities next summer.

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The *Employment First Florida Success Stories Series* highlights examples of innovative employment services, creative state agency employment practices, and individual employment success stories in Florida. The series is a product of the EmployMe1st project, a joint project of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services.

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