

Assessments of Virginia's Disability Services System:

Pre-Employment Transition Services



Competitive Integrated Employment



2025 Assessments of Pre-Employment Transition Services and Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment

First Edition

This report is also available in alternative formats by request and on the Virginia Board's website. For more information, please contact the Board at:

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The Virginians with Disabilities Act § 51.5-33 directs the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities (VBPD), beginning July 1, 2017, to submit an annual report to the Governor, through the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, that provides an in-depth assessment of at least two service areas for people with disabilities in the Commonwealth. The Board, as part of its authority and responsibility as a Developmental Disabilities (DD) Council under the federal Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act (42 U.S.C. §15021-15029), is also required to complete a similar analysis as it develops and amends its federal State Plan goals and objectives.

The Board selected Pre-Employment Transition Services and Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment as the topic areas to be assessed for this reporting period. In these assessments, the Board seeks to determine the benefits and challenges of accessing employment services starting in high school and continuing after transition out of school. Based on these findings, the Board makes recommendations to improve access to employment services.

We appreciate the assistance of the state agencies and other stakeholders that provided information. The policy recommendations included in this assessment were developed by an ad hoc committee of the Board and approved by the full Board at its June 5, 2025, meeting.

Table of Contents

Statement of Values.....	1
Executive Summary.....	2
Assessment of Pre-Employment Transition Services.....	3
Recommendations Related to Knowledge of Families	3
Recommendation Related to Accountability.....	3
Recommendations Related to Knowledge of School Staff	3
Recommendations Related to Access to Services	3
Recommendations Related to Systems Change	4
Assessment of Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment	4
Recommendations Related to Expectations.....	4
Recommendations Related to Foundational Knowledge	4
Recommendations Related to Transportation	5
Assessment of Pre-Employment Transition Services.....	6
Background	6
Definition of Pre-Employment Transition Services.....	6
Eligibility	6
Information Gathering	6
Findings and Recommendations	7
Knowledge of Families	7
Accountability	8
Knowledge of School Staff.....	9
Access to Services	12
Systems Change	13
Assessment of Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment	15
Background	15
What is Competitive, Integrated Employment?	15
Why is Competitive, Integrated Employment Important?	15
Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment	15
Information Gathering	16

Findings and Recommendations	16
Expectations.....	16
Foundational Knowledge.....	17
Transportation	19
Appendix A: Resources.....	21
Pre-Employment Transition Services.....	21
Post-High School Employment	22
Appendix B: Acknowledgements.....	24
Stakeholders Interviewed	24
Works Cited.....	25

Statement of Values

"Physical or mental disabilities in no way diminish a person's right to fully participate in all aspects of society, yet many people with physical or mental disabilities have been precluded from doing so because of discrimination ... [H]istorically, society has tended to isolate and segregate individuals with disabilities, and, despite some improvements, such forms of discrimination against individuals with disabilities continue to be a serious and pervasive social problem ..."

— 42 U.S. Code § 12101 – Americans with Disabilities Act – Findings and Purpose

The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities serves as Virginia's Developmental Disability Council. In this capacity, the Board advises the Governor, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, federal and state legislators and other constituent groups on issues important to people with disabilities in the Commonwealth. The following assessment of Assessment of Pre-Employment Transition Services and Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment are intended to serve as a guide for policymakers who are interested in ensuring that people with disabilities live fully integrated lives in their communities, with the supports they need, based on their interests and lifestyle choices. The Board's work in this area is driven by its vision, values and the following core beliefs and principles:

Inherent Dignity: All people possess inherent dignity, regardless of gender, race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation or disability status.

Presumed Capacity: All people should be presumed capable of obtaining a level of independence and making informed decisions about their lives.

Self-Determination: People with disabilities and their families are experts in their own needs and desires. They must be included in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Integration: People with disabilities have a civil right to receive services and supports in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs and desires, consistent with the Supreme Court's Olmstead decision.

Diversity: Diversity is a core value. All people, including people with disabilities, should be valued for contributing to the diversity of our neighborhoods and of the Commonwealth.

Freedom from Abuse and Neglect: People with disabilities must be protected from abuse, neglect and exploitation in all settings where services and supports are provided.

Fiscal Responsibility: Fiscally responsible policies are beneficial for the Commonwealth, and they are beneficial for people with disabilities.

This report presents two related assessments, 1) Pre-Employment Transition Services, and 2) Competitive Integrated Employment for recent graduates with a disability.

PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENTS

To identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities within Virginia's efforts to prepare and support students with disabilities and recent graduates with disabilities for competitive integrated employment with the goal of informing policy and practice improvements that promote successful transitions to work.

Executive Summary

The current employment environment remains challenging for individuals with disabilities, who continue to experience significantly lower employment rates compared to their peers without disabilities. In 2024, 22.7% of individuals with a disability were employed compared with 65.5% of those without a disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Barriers such as limited access to services, low expectations, inadequate support structures and confusion about how employment impacts public benefits persist. Addressing the barriers to accessing employment services during high school and beyond is necessary to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and related employment support play a critical role in addressing these disparities by preparing students with disabilities to enter the workforce. Pre-ETS helps youth explore career interests, build essential job skills and develop the confidence needed to pursue meaningful, competitive employment. Ensuring timely, individualized access to Pre-ETS is crucial for improving long-term outcomes and supporting the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

The barriers to competitive, integrated employment extend beyond individual ability and often stem from systemic challenges such as limited access to transportation, insufficient knowledge of available services, low expectations from families and professionals and confusion about public benefits. Structural obstacles within service systems, such as inconsistent guidance and inadequate training, further compound these difficulties. Addressing these barriers is essential not only for improving employment outcomes but also for ensuring individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities to contribute to and benefit from meaningful work in their communities.

The following recommendations address barriers to access to Pre-Employment Transition Services during high school and competitive, integrated employment after transitioning out of the school system.

Assessment of Pre-Employment Transition Services

Recommendations Related to Knowledge of Families

1. The Virginia Department of Education should provide guidance to all Local Education Agencies on initiating the discussion of transition services beginning in elementary school. The guidance should include a requirement that parents be provided with comprehensive information, in both written and spoken formats, on Pre-Employment Transition Services, developed through collaboration with the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services. Information should include the appropriate contact (transition coordinator, school counselor, etc.) to learn more about these services.
2. The Virginia Department of Education and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should partner to develop a multi-tiered marketing strategy to 1) build a network of collaborators, 2) share information on Pre-ETS with families to expand access and enrollment in Pre-ETS and 3) build trust with families.

Recommendation Related to Accountability

3. The Virginia Department of Education and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should partner to develop a leadership and accountability strategy or plan that includes clear performance targets, regular monitoring and reporting, program evaluation, stakeholder engagement and feedback and accountability for areas that need improvement.

Recommendations Related to Knowledge of School Staff

4. The General Assembly should require and provide funding for a dedicated, full-time Transition Coordinator position within high school.
5. The Virginia Department of Education should require comprehensive training, such as that currently available through VCU-RRTC Center on Transition Innovations, for all transition coordinators.
6. The General Assembly should convene a workgroup to study the development of a Transition Specialist teaching endorsement in Virginia.
7. The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) and the Virginia Department of Education should collaborate with Training and Technical Assistance Centers and the Center Transition Innovation at VCU to establish and strengthen a collaborative network between DARS counselors and school division personnel. This collaboration should include regular opportunities for shared learning, resources development and the provision of ongoing technical assistance and guidance.

Recommendations Related to Access to Services

8. The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should continue to equitably expand its Pre-ETS offerings to include a larger variety of options including virtual, group and individual focused options and career exploration opportunities in high growth

industries (e.g., IT, health care, skill trades), to best serve the needs of students on an individual basis.

9. The Virginia Department of Education and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should collaborate to develop opportunities for inclusive student-led enterprises within schools and Pre-ETS programs that could be integrated into summer school offerings or extended school year services as appropriate.

Recommendations Related to Systems Change

10. The Virginia Department of Education should provide guidance to school divisions on incorporating discussion of career exploration into IEP meetings starting in elementary schools.

Assessment of Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment

Recommendations Related to Expectations

1. The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should collaborate with community partners to develop a plan or program to empower parents and caregivers of individuals with disabilities with the knowledge, tools and emotional support needed to facilitate successful employment outcomes.
2. The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services should require training for all residential service providers and staff regarding the importance of supporting employment goals of residents.
3. The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services should provide ongoing training for all support coordinators regarding the importance of supporting employment goals.

Recommendations Related to Foundational Knowledge

4. The Virginia Department of Education, the Department for Aging and Rehabilitation Services and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, in partnership with the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center, should collaborate on benefits training to be provided to parents prior to their child leaving school to ease the transition to employment.
5. The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should collaborate with the Department for Behavioral Health and Developmental Services to work internally to ensure that all offices are following the same procedures and providing consistent guidance.

Recommendations Related to Transportation

6. The General Assembly should instruct the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to study transportation options for persons with disabilities and identify ways to expand or enhance services and capacity.
7. The General Assembly should convene a workgroup to develop recommendations to improve transportation options that result from the previously recommended JLARC study.

Assessment of Pre-Employment Transition Services

Background

Definition of Pre-Employment Transition Services

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), signed in 2014, requires vocational rehabilitation agencies to set aside at least 15% of federal funds to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). Pre-ETS are the earliest set of services available for students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for vocational rehabilitation services. Pre-ETS are short-term in nature and designed to help students identify career interests. There are five required Pre-ETS activities which are described in the chart below.

Pre-ETS Activity	Examples
Job Exploration Counseling	Complete career interest inventories; attend a career fair
Work-Based Learning Experiences	Conduct informational interviews; participate in job shadowing; go on a workplace tour
Counseling on Educational and Training Options	Attend college fairs or tour a campus; shadow classes at a local career and technical school or college
Workplace Readiness Training	Explore assistive technology in the workplace; develop banking and budgeting skills; complete a mock interview
Instruction in Self-Advocacy	Attend a presentation of recent graduates to learn about their experiences after graduation; practice disclosing disability on the job

Eligibility

Pre-ETS may be provided to students who are at least 14 years of age and 1) are receiving special education services and have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or 2) have a 504 plan, or 3) have a disability not served by other means from the school and can provide documentation of disability. The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) reports that during the 2023-24 school year, there were nearly 80,000 students with disabilities in Virginia. In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2024, DARS provided approximately 23,000 Pre-ETS services. There is considerable room for growth in the program.

Information Gathering

To determine the focus of this assessment, the Board relied heavily on the insights gathered through interviews with stakeholders throughout the Commonwealth, including agency staff, service providers, advocacy partners, parents and self-advocates. The assessment highlights the most frequently reported issues, identifying them as the most significant barriers to be addressed.

Findings and Recommendations

Knowledge of Families

To access services for their children, families must understand the systems that are involved, the services available and how to access services. As a parent of a child with a disability, the amount of information can be overwhelming. DARS, the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and other agencies have created great resources on Pre-ETS, including webinars and short videos. These resources are available on these agencies' websites, but many families are unaware of where to look to find them. (See Appendix A for a table full of resources.)

In contrast, the Department for the Blind and the Vision Impaired (DBVI) reports that the issues of parent involvement and understanding are not as prevalent within their community. DBVI provides Pre-ETS tailored to meet the unique needs of students who are blind, vision impaired or deafblind. The parents with whom they are working are more connected to the system due to their families' unique needs.

Families are unaware of the services available through Pre-ETS and how those services could benefit their family.

In discussions with parents and advocates, it is clear that families are completely unaware of the existence of Pre-ETS or how to get such services for their child. In fact, in conversations with parent advocates, a common response is that even for those parents who are well connected and understand the system, it can be very difficult to access Pre-ETS. What about parents who may not be as well connected? How do families find out about these services?

To assist families in obtaining this information, discussions with trusted professionals are likely to yield the best results. For many families, teachers or the IEP team will be the best entry point for this type of information. These are individuals who have a relationship with the family. In addition, starting conversations early in a child's education path will allow overwhelmed families to absorb the information over time.

The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services reports an ongoing issue with its counselors having difficulty obtaining the needed parent signatures on forms to initiate services.

For a student to receive Pre-ETS, the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) must obtain specific information from families, including a parent signature on the Information Release and Consent Form. DARS counselors have reported that it can be difficult to obtain the signatures needed from families. The reasons for this are numerous. Some families are uncomfortable giving information about their child to another state agency. Some families simply don't understand the signature requirement or the benefits of the services that they could be receiving if proper documentation is completed.

The lack of trust in the system is likely based on misunderstanding and a lack of information. Building trust between families and agencies that provide services to individuals with disabilities is essential for effective support. Trust fosters open communication, mutual respect and collaboration. When families feel heard and valued, they are more likely to engage in planning and advocating for their loved one. In addition, building trust between families and service providers allows for better partnerships that benefit both agency staff and families.

Better information sharing with families is necessary to help them understand what services may be available to their child and how to access them. If schools begin to provide transition information at an early age, it provides families with a greater opportunity to ask questions and seek clarity before feeling the pressure of transition decisions. Again, the trusted professional can be one of the best sources of information.

Recommendation 1: The Virginia Department of Education should provide guidance to all Local Education Agencies on initiating the discussion of transition services beginning in elementary school. The guidance should include a requirement that parents be provided with comprehensive information, in both written and spoken formats, on Pre-Employment Transition Services developed through collaboration with the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services. Information should include the appropriate contact (transition coordinator, school counselor, etc.) to learn more about these services.

Recommendation 2: The Virginia Department of Education and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should partner to develop a multi-tiered marketing strategy to 1) build a network of collaborators, 2) share information on Pre-ETS with families to expand access and enrollment in Pre-ETS and 3) build trust with families.

Accountability

There does not appear to be any accountability system in place to ensure that students are being offered and receive needed Pre-ETS.

The provision of Pre-ETS to students requires a partnership between DARS and VDOE. Unfortunately, that partnership is better in some areas of the Commonwealth than others. There are reports that some schools are not allowing DARS counselors to enter the school. On the other hand, in some areas, there are complaints that DARS counselors are not working with school personnel to schedule services. There does not appear to be any type of accountability system in place.

In addition, there is a lack of clear data on who is being served. The VDOE collects data on the number of students with disabilities, and those with IEPs or 504 plans. DARS collects data on how many Pre-ETS services are provided, the number of applications for Pre-ETS services and the number of potentially eligible students that move to vocational rehabilitation services.

Additional data is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of Pre-ETS, including outcome data, student and family feedback, school and provider feedback and long-term tracking information.

Recommendation 3: The Virginia Department of Education and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should partner to develop a leadership and accountability strategy or plan that include clear performance targets, regular monitoring and reporting, program evaluation, stakeholder engagement and feedback and accountability for areas that need improvement.

Knowledge of School Staff

Another important piece of the Pre-ETS puzzle is the school staff. School staff, including teachers, transition coordinators and administrators, need to work together with DARS counselors and families to provide services that result in the best outcomes for students. For this reason, it is important that school staff are knowledgeable about Pre-ETS and their role in ensuring students' access to these services.

Teachers are often unfamiliar with the scope of Pre-ETS available or how to refer students.

Understanding of Pre-ETS varies widely among teachers, both across and within school districts. Teachers are asked to do more and more with what many consider inadequate time. Adding transition training and responsibilities to the existing load is difficult. For teachers who are interested in training, the VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) and Center for Transition Innovation offer various training opportunities through interactive online courses, self-paced courses, webinars and webcasts. Additionally, the RRTC offers the Statewide Transition Leaders Academy described below.

Virginia Code Section 22.1-217.3, the result of legislation passed in 2023, requires each public high school to identify a faculty member responsible for special education transition planning and coordination. The General Assembly did not provide funding for training these individuals.

While each high school is required to identify a transition coordinator, the role can be difficult to fill, especially when candidates lack necessary training. Additional funding is necessary to properly train transition coordinators to serve as a subject matter expert within their schools. The RRTC at VCU has extensive training for transition coordinators through the Statewide Transition Leaders Academy. It is a year-long program that helps transition leaders make a difference in planning and delivering transition services for students with disabilities. Training of this nature provides a basis for a true transition coordinator position.

Transition coordinators, in most cases, are teachers or administrators who were asked to take on additional responsibilities with no additional support.

To meet the requirements of Virginia Code Section 22.1-217.3, many schools were forced to ask current teachers, case managers, administrators or other staff to take on the additional duties of a transition coordinator. A teacher with a full class schedule, and possibly a case load of their own, is not able to commit the necessary time to provide adequate transition services for families. A transition coordinator requires additional funding for adequate training and the ability to focus only on transition coordination services.

Transition coordinators should be a standalone position, with adequate time and resources to assist families.

Each high school should have a dedicated, full-time transition coordinator. When transition responsibilities are added to an already overburdened teacher's schedule, it limits both the effectiveness of the role and opportunity for proper training. If funding were provided to create a full-time transition coordinator position at each high school, it would allow that position to become fully trained and serve as the school's subject matter expert on transition. In this role, they could also provide valuable support and guidance to other school staff.

In addition, creating incentives for transition coordinator roles would help strengthen and sustain the position. One way to achieve this would be to develop a transition coordinator teaching endorsement that can be earned through comprehensive training in this area. The endorsement would add subject matter expertise in transition services to a teacher's existing license. This credential would promote professional growth in transition leadership throughout the Commonwealth, leading to improved employment outcomes for the students being served.

A few states have created Transition Specialist Endorsements for teachers. In Massachusetts, a transition specialist endorsement was created by the legislature in 2012. Ohio offers a Transition to Work endorsement for individuals who coordinate transition. In Georgia, transition specialists are required to have a Special Education Transition Specialist endorsement. Virginia should consider these examples when creating an endorsement available to Virginia teachers.

Recommendation 4: The General Assembly should require and provide funding for a dedicated, full-time Transition Coordinator position with high schools.

Recommendation 5: The Virginia Department of Education should require comprehensive training, such as that currently available through VCU-RRTC Center on Transition Innovations, for all transition coordinators.

Recommendation 6: The General Assembly should convene a workgroup to study the development of a Transition Specialist teaching endorsement in Virginia.

Inconsistency among school personnel and DARS personnel, often due to staff turnover, is an overarching theme. Individuals report that school personnel and DARS counselors often provide conflicting information.

Two of the top recurring themes that arose during conversations with stakeholders were inconsistency and the need for collaboration. Parents noted that teachers don't always seem to understand Pre-ETS and what DARS counselors do, and DARS counselors don't fully understand the teacher's role in providing services. A better understanding of the roles of all parties is necessary to facilitate collaboration.

Access to Pre-ETS and successful outcomes are most often the result of successful collaboration between teachers, DARS counselors and families.

Collaboration is the key to better employment outcomes for students. Collaboration requires coordinated efforts and partnerships between the different agencies and individuals involved in supporting students with disabilities during transition. There are several examples of collaborations that have been highly successful, such as Project SEARCH and Project PEACE, which are described below. Stakeholders reported that in some schools, the collaboration among DARS, the school and families is excellent and results in great programming for students. This does not appear to be the case across the board. Collaboration can be challenging and requires all parties to be active participants, but the results can be inspiring.

An example of a successful collaboration is Project SEARCH (VCU-RRTC Center on Transition Innovations, n.d.). Project SEARCH provides a one-year work training experience for young adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities (ID/DD) through collaboration with the business community. The program provides three unpaid internships for the students to develop job skills and social skills necessary for successful employment. There are 21 Project SEARCH sites across the Commonwealth.

Project PEACE is another example of collaboration resulting in better outcomes. Project PEACE (Promoting Employment After High School through Community Expertise) supports community collaboration to strengthen transition experiences. Project PEACE is a Developmental Disabilities Project of National Significance led by the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The project includes collaboration between the Partnership for People with Disabilities, VCU School of Education and Richmond Public Schools. The goal of the project is to "increase and enhance collaborations across existing local systems to maximize a seamless experience and outcome of youth with ID/DD as they transition between school and work in the community." (Partnership for People with Disabilities, n.d.)

Recommendation 7: The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) and the Virginia Department of Education should collaborate with Training and Technical Assistance Centers and the Center for Transition Innovation at VCU to establish and strengthen a collaborative network between DARS counselors and school division personnel. This collaboration should include regular opportunities for shared learning, resource development and the provision of ongoing technical assistance and guidance.

Access to Services

There are many barriers to accessing Pre-ETS, including a lack of awareness, limited school resources, inflexible school schedules and transportation. Scheduling services during the school day can be difficult, especially for a student who is on the diploma track and may not have built in time during their school day for such services. That's why creativity and flexibility are important in the design of Pre-ETS opportunities.

Pre-ETS can and should be provided in a variety of ways to allow access by individuals in different situations and to provide truly individualized plans for service.

To reduce barriers to accessing services, it is important that the menu of Pre-ETS options be diverse. Pre-ETS should be individualized to serve each student's needs. Some states, such as North Carolina and Texas, offer virtual Pre-ETS programs. An expansion into an option of more virtual Pre-ETS can help to tackle the transportation barriers, as well as scheduling difficulties. Options for Pre-ETS should include both group and individual services, virtual options and after school options.

For some students, a program like the Postsecondary Education Rehabilitation Transition (PERT) program at the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center could be a great option. The PERT program is a school-to-work transition program where students reside in a dormitory. The program includes a comprehensive evaluation and situational assessment. All services are designed to assist students with the transition from school to work.

It is also important that Pre-ETS be designed to meet the unique needs, strengths and goals of each student. By tailoring services such as job exploration, work-based learning and self-advocacy training, educators and counselors can empower students to build confidence, develop critical skills and pursue paths that align with the student's vision for the future. The more options, the better it is to be able to provide students with the appropriate services.

Recommendation 8: The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should continue to equitably expand its Pre-ETS offerings to include a larger variety of options including virtual, group and individuals focused options and career exploration opportunities in high growth industries (e.g., IT, health care, skill trades), to best serve the needs of students on an individual basis.

Student-led enterprises provide meaningful, hands-on work experiences that enhance employment readiness, self-confidence and job skills.

There are many examples of student-led enterprises within schools across the Commonwealth, which could be added to the menu of Pre-ETS options. Common examples include coffee carts, cafes, school stores and copying services for teachers. Schools offer a truly unique environment with many different types of jobs that could be perfect for a job shadow experience or internship in areas such as administrative tasks, food service, custodial tasks, maintenance, etc. In schools where these opportunities exist, students gain valuable hands-on learning experiences. Unfortunately, many schools do not offer these opportunities.

Extended School Year and summer school periods are ideal for work-based learning experiences, self-advocacy instruction and job readiness training.

Summer is a great time for delivering Pre-ETS. With more flexible schedules, students are better able to participate in activities such as job shadowing or internships. Just as many high school students take on summer jobs, students with disabilities should have equal access to these experiences. The shortened time of summer school or extended school year services is ideal for focusing on transition skills. It would be a great time for teaching self-advocacy skills or career exploration. Offering Pre-ETS in the summer keeps students engaged and learning, helping them to continue working on communication skills and maintaining a routine and structure.

Recommendation 9: The Virginia Department of Education and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should collaborate to develop opportunities for inclusive student-led enterprises within schools and Pre-ETS programs that could be integrated into summer school offerings or extended school year services as appropriate.

Systems Change

The final topic of this assessment is systems change. It involves a comprehensive look at how school to employment transition is planned, how Pre-ETS are structured and delivered and how information is shared. In some ways, it involves a complete rethinking of how the system works and what could be better.

Introducing career exploration and employment discussions at an earlier age provides a foundation for important conversations and decisions during later transitions.

For students without disabilities, discussions about what they want to be when they grow up start very early. Even in elementary school, teachers find ways to incorporate career exploration into the curriculum. This same approach should be used for students with disabilities. This is an effort currently supported by VDOE. The VCU-RRTC Center on Transition Innovations provides a self-paced course for teachers titled Early Transition Planning Strategies for Pre-K through 5. This program helps teachers provide the tools to begin these early discussions.

Normalizing discussions of employment and future transitions in elementary school will allow families to learn and plan appropriately as their child approaches transition.

Parents of students with disabilities often feel overwhelmed by the constant flow of information they receive about their child's needs, services and supports. This overload of information makes it difficult to completely understand any of the information. One approach to help parents is to provide them with key information repeatedly over time. For many parents, repetition builds familiarity and confidence. They may not be able to absorb all of the information the first time, but each exposure increases understanding. By providing information repeatedly, starting early in elementary school, parents will be better prepared to make informed decisions when critical transition planning begins.

Recommendation 10: The Virginia Department of Education should provide guidance to school divisions on incorporating discussions of career exploration into IEP meetings starting in elementary schools.

Assessment of Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment

Background

Competitive, integrated employment is grounded in the belief that all individuals, including those with disabilities, have the right to meaningful work, fair wages and full participation in the workforce. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) emphasized employment in the most integrated settings possible as a key outcome for individuals with disabilities. Competitive, integrated employment is a pathway to financial independence and a critical component of community inclusion.

What is Competitive, Integrated Employment?

Competitive, integrated employment is defined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as shown in the graphic below. What it really means is simply **real work for real pay**.

Competitive, integrated employment is work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is:

- Compensated at or above minimum wage and comparable to the customary rate paid by the employer to employees without disabilities performing similar duties and with similar training and experiences;
- Receiving the same level of benefits provided to other employees without disabilities in similar positions;
- At a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities; and
- Presented opportunities for advancement similar to other employees with disabilities in similar positions.

(As defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act)

Why is Competitive, Integrated Employment Important?

Employment is a major factor associated with an individual's overall quality of life. Employment is tied to better mental and physical health. The data shows that individuals with disabilities in the workforce are twice as likely to be unemployed as compared to their non-disabled peers with an unemployment rate of 7.5% for individuals with disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Competitive, integrated employment is so much more than just a job; it's about equal opportunity, independence and inclusion.

Barriers to Competitive, Integrated Employment

There are many barriers to accessing competitive, integrated employment. Some of the most often mentioned barriers include high support needs, lack of job skills, transportation, funding for support services, benefits confusion, lack of awareness of available services and family

expectations. This assessment focuses on the barriers most often reported by stakeholders during interviews.

Information Gathering

To determine the focus of this assessment, the Board relied heavily on the input of stakeholders throughout the Commonwealth. This assessment is based on information gleaned from interviews with agency staff, service providers, advocacy partners, parents and self-advocates. These interviews helped to determine which barriers should be the focus of the assessment. The assessment addresses the issues that were reported most often by stakeholders and therefore are seen as significant barriers.

Findings and Recommendations

Expectations

Expectations are a powerful driver of employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Research consistently shows that when families, educators, service providers and individuals themselves hold high expectations for employment, there is a greater likelihood of successful workforce participation. These expectations influence the types of opportunities pursued, the level of support provided, and the development of skills needed for competitive employment. In contrast, low expectations can serve as a major barrier, limiting access to meaningful job experiences and reinforcing misconceptions about capabilities. Therefore, fostering a culture of high expectations is essential to promoting inclusive employment outcomes and helping individuals with disabilities reach their full potential.

Parental expectations significantly influence the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities.

Studies have shown that parent expectations are a significant predictor of high school graduation rates and employment after high school, for students from all disability categories (Bonnie Doren, 2012). High parental expectations can lead to increased confidence and motivation, while low expectations may unintentionally limit opportunities and reinforce dependency.

Many parents hold lower expectations for their children with disabilities due to concerns about safety, lack of support services or societal stigma.

Many parents have concerns about the ability of their child to work. Many of these concerns may be based on fear of the unknown. Fears about vulnerability, exploitation or the potential for failure can lead parents to be cautious about encouraging employment. Parents need to see examples of success; they need information on what supports are available that could help their child to succeed. Addressing these barriers through education, support and advocacy is essential to shifting expectations and expanding opportunities.

Recommendation 1: The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should collaborate with community partners to develop a plan or program to empower parents and caregivers of individuals with disabilities with the knowledge, tools and emotional support needed to facilitate successful employment outcomes.

Group homes often fall short in promoting and facilitating employment opportunities for their residents. Providers report that group homes often create barriers to employment.

Some individuals with disabilities move out of their family's home and live independently or in shared housing, such as group homes. Unfortunately, moving out of the family home does not always lead to increased independence and opportunities for employment. Group homes can have rigid structures and rules that limit the ability of residents to work. In order for employment to be successful, the individual must have the support of their group home. Staff may prioritize safety and routine over independence and work opportunities. In addition, group home staff may lack training in employment services or be unaware of available resources. Group home staff are required to complete a number of training courses, but most are medical-based courses. This causes the group home to adopt a caretaking model rather than a model that promotes independence.

Support coordinators can also unintentionally create barriers through low expectations and lack of training in employment services. Employment may not be prioritized with more focus placed on day programs or residential stability. When employment is not seen as a top priority, the opportunity for independence, financial stability and community inclusion can be missed.

Recommendation 2: The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services should require training for all residential service providers and staff regarding the importance of supporting employment goals of residents.

Recommendation 3: The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services should provide ongoing training for all support coordinators regarding the importance of supporting employment goals.

Foundational Knowledge

As with our assessment of pre-employment transition services, one of the largest barriers to accessing competitive, integrated employment is a lack of knowledge about the available services and how to access them. Information is available from various sources, but it often fails to reach the people who need it most. Both DARS and the Department for Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) provide employment information on their websites for easy access. In addition, the Parent Educational Advocacy and Training Center (PEATC) has a

collection of employment information on its website. Included in Appendix A to this assessment is a list of various sources of information.

Many parents are unaware of the many employment services that may be available to their adult child with a disability.

In Virginia, DBHDS has a policy of employment first. Under this policy, “community-based individual supported employment in an integrated work setting is presented as the first and priority services option among available day service options offered by case managers and support coordinators...” (State Board of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2012). Families should use their case manager or support coordinator as a resource for obtaining information about the types of services available to assist their loved one with achieving employment success.

Confusion around the effect of employment on benefits is a huge barrier.

One of the largest information barriers that exists for families is a misunderstanding of the effects of employment on benefits. Families depend on various benefits such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) to live their lives. These systems can be very confusing for families and often lead to the misconception that their child cannot work, as it will be detrimental to the benefits that they receive. Parents and students can be educated through benefits training, which is a service available through DARS vocational rehabilitation services and PEATC. Receiving accurate and timely benefits information before transitioning out of high school is crucial. Without a clear understanding of the available benefits and how employment may affect them, families may discourage employment due to fears of losing benefits.

Benefits counseling is available through many different routes including DARS, Developmental Disabilities (DD) waivers, Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) and Work Incentives Special Advocacy (WISA). Information about these opportunities can help families access important information about various work incentives that may be available for their loved one. This knowledge allows for informed decision-making and helps families view employment as a realistic and positive goal. By ensuring benefits training is part of the transition process, the transition from school to work is smoother and the individual has an increased likelihood of having positive employment outcomes.

Recommendation 4: The Virginia Department of Education, the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, in partnership with the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center, should collaborate on benefits training to be provided to parents prior to their child leaving school to ease the transition to employment.

From a provider point of view, consistency in interpretation and implementation of policies, processes and procedures is lacking across DARS offices and creates barriers for providers.

One of the top barriers reported by service providers is the inconsistency in how procedures are interpreted and implemented across different DARS offices. Although all offices operate under the same policy manual, providers note that each office often applies the procedures differently, leading to confusion, delays and frustration. For example, providers may encounter varying expectations for Pre-ETS referrals, documentation requirements or approval timelines, depending on which office they are working with. As a result, providers find themselves having to explain or correct procedural misunderstandings, which takes time and falls outside their responsibilities. This challenge extends beyond DARS; similar inconsistencies are also reported between DBHDS and DARS, creating further barriers to coordination and service delivery.

The importance of the consistency of information cannot be overstated. When agencies provide conflicting or incomplete information, it can create confusion, delay services and erode trust in the system. Consistency results in streamlined processes and efficiencies, not to mention better services for the individuals who need it most.

Recommendation 5: The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services should collaborate with the Department for Behavioral Health and Developmental Services to work internally to ensure that all offices are following the same procedures and providing consistent guidance.

Transportation

Transportation is a barrier that affects nearly every facet of life. This is an issue that the Board has assessed in areas such as healthcare, but it is no less a barrier when it comes to accessing competitive, integrated employment.

Transportation remains a significant barrier to employment for individuals with disabilities, with limited access to reliable, accessible and affordable transportation options.

In many areas, transportation providers are limited, and those that do exist are often unreliable. In rural areas of the Commonwealth, the options are even fewer. Without affordable and dependable transportation, individuals with disabilities may be forced to rely heavily on family members or support staff, which may not be sustainable. For many, transportation is the deciding factor in whether employment is even possible. While some regions, such as Northern Virginia, Richmond and Hampton Roads, offer more robust public transportation systems, barriers still exist. These include inaccessibility of the bus stops, inflexible bus routes that don't align with work schedules or locations, and systems that are difficult to navigate.

The Virginia Disability Commission has recognized the need for a study on transportation options as it recommended through Delegate Laufer’s HJ 445 during the 2025 General Assembly Session. Unfortunately, the legislation was left in House Rules.

During the 2025 General Assembly Session, Delegate Amy Laufer filed HJ 445, which directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) to study transportation options in rural areas for people with disabilities and identify ways to expand or enhance such transportation services. The bill was a recommendation of the Disability Commission. Unfortunately, the bill did not make it out of committee, but this remains an important issue that should be studied.

JLARC has the resources needed to complete a comprehensive study with recommendations for the expansion of services and capacity. It will then be important for stakeholders to implement recommendations for real changes to the transportation system throughout the Commonwealth. Transportation is not a new barrier, but it is a pervasive barrier that will require creativity and collaboration to improve.

Recommendation 6: The General Assembly should instruct the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to study transportation options for persons with disabilities and identify ways to expand or enhance services and capacity.

Recommendation 7: The General Assembly should convene a workgroup to develop recommendations to improve transportation options that result from the previously recommended JLARC study.

Appendix A: Resources

Below are resources currently available for families to access regarding pre-employment transitions services and post-high school transition employment services.

Pre-Employment Transition Services

Organization	Documents and Links
Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS)	Pre-ETS & VR Transition Services: https://www.dars.virginia.gov/drs/transitionservices.htm#gsc.tab=0 Pre-ETS flier: https://www.dars.virginia.gov/drs/downloads/Pre_ETS%20flier%20ENGLISH%202024.pdf
Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI)	Pre-ETS: https://www.dbvi.virginia.gov/students.htm
disAbility Law Center of Virginia (dLCV)	I Have a Choice, I Have a Voice: https://www.dlc.v.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COA-Manual-Web-Version-2020.pdf
Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC)	Workshops: https://peatc.org/trainings-workshops/workshops/ Transition Guide: https://peatc.org/transition-guide/ Factsheets: https://peatc.org/services/transition-to-adulthood/
Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU RRTC)	www.preetts.org Family Support of Pre-ETS: https://preetts.vcurrtrc.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=41 Pre-ETS Flier: https://preetts.vcurrtrc.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=9 Job Exploration: https://preetts.vcurrtrc.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=3

	Work-Based Learning: https://preets.vcurrtec.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=4 Counseling on Educational and Training Options: https://preets.vcurrtec.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=1 Workplace Readiness Skills: https://preets.vcurrtec.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=5 Instruction in Self-Advocacy: https://preets.vcurrtec.org/resources/publications/download.cfm?id=2 Center on Transition Innovations Discovering Me!: https://centerontransition.org/projects/discoveringme.cfm Employment: https://centerontransition.org/transition/employment.cfm Pre-ETS Navigators: https://cfi.partnership.vcu.edu/programs/Pre-ETS-navigator/
Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center	https://www.wwrc.virginia.gov/ Postsecondary Education Rehabilitation Transition Program: https://www.wwrc.virginia.gov/PERT.htm

Post-High School Employment

Organization	Documents and Links
Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS)	DOJ Settlement Agreement Reports: https://dojsettlementagreement.virginia.gov/
Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS)	Employment Service & Special Programs: https://www.dars.virginia.gov/essp/

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC)	Factsheets: https://peatc.org/services/transition-to-adulthood/ Competitive Integrated Employment: https://peatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Competitive-Integrated-Employment-Fears-and-Solutions.pdf Work and Benefits: https://peatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Work-and-Benefits-%E2%80%93-How-Your-Child-Can-Work-and-Keep-Benefits.pdf
Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center	https://www.wwrc.virginia.gov/default.htm

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

Stakeholders Interviewed

Judy Averill, M.Ed., Director, Center on Transition Innovations, VCU-Rehabilitation Research and Training Center

Donna Bonessi, Director, Employment Services and Special Programs, Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

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John Evankovich, Contract and Data Manager, Fairfax Community Services Board

Megan O'Toole Hall, MS, CRC, Director, Vocational Rehabilitation and Workforce Services, Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired

Jason Harper, MS, CRC, President, RSVP, Inc.

Adair Jenson-Smith, Director of Operations and Training, The Choice Group

Heidi Lawyer, Deputy Director and Kendra Wormley, RSA-Transition to Adulthood Project Coordinator, Parent Education Advocacy Training Center

Matt Luther, Transition and Education Services Manager, Division of Rehabilitative Services, Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

Heather Norton, MSW, Deputy Commissioner, Community Services and Dina Martinez-Lombardy, M.S., QMHP, Community Employment Specialist, Department for Behavioral Health and Developmental Services

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Kelly Reichard, Executive Director, Stand Up, Inc.

Julie Triplett, Resources and Vocational Access Unit Manager and Rachel Loria, Senior Disability Rights Advocate, disAbility Law Center of Virginia

Various parent and self-advocate stakeholders

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