

WorkAbility I

A California Transition Program

California's WorkAbility I program is currently celebrating three decades of success—30 years of providing work experience to students with disabilities. However, this widely lauded initiative got its start from some pretty dismal statistics: In 1980, a two-year study showed that California was doing little to help students with disabilities develop the vocational skills they needed for employment after they left school. California was not the only state showing disappointing data: according to national employment figures for the early eighties, barely one-third of adults with disabilities had jobs at all, and these numbers included part-time work.

Then-secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), Madeline Wills, went to work and by 1984 had developed her Bridges initiative. Within that effort, Wills established the importance of transition services for students and defined them as “an outcome oriented process encompassing a broad array of services and experiences that lead to employment. Transition is a period that includes high school, the point of graduation, additional post secondary education or adult services, and the initial years of employment. Transition is a bridge between the security and structure offered by the school and the risks of life.” By that same year, California's WorkAbility was already two years old.

WorkAbility At a Glance

- WorkAbility I is a school-based transition program working to benefit students, employers, and the community at large by meeting the needs of local job markets.
- WorkAbility I promotes independent living and provides comprehensive pre-employment and follow-up services for youth in special education.
- WorkAbility I provides secondary special education students ages 14 to 22 with the opportunity to obtain marketable job skills while completing their education.

WorkAbility II, III, and IV

WorkAbility I shares its name with three other initiatives that help individuals with disabilities gain vocational counseling, training, and work experience. People who qualify for, or who are served by, the Department of Rehabilitation are eligible for WorkAbility II, III, and IV in the following ways:

- WorkAbility II is designed for out-of-school youths and adults with disabilities; it operates through local education agencies/school districts, adult schools, and Regional Occupational Programs.
- WorkAbility III is designed for California Community College students.
- WorkAbility IV is designed for California State University students.

Educational leaders and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have since broadened the definition of transition to include the entire community and to span an individual's lifetime. WorkAbility, however, assumed the right shape from the beginning. While it provides instruction and experiences that reinforce concepts taught in the core curriculum, WorkAbility has always primarily focused on two things: (1) helping students develop skills that lead to gainful employment and (2) providing students with opportunities for direct work experience (both paid and unpaid) and ultimately job placement. At the same time, the program works with employers to help them recognize the valuable contributions that individuals with disabilities can make to the workforce and their communities. In addition to providing work experience opportunities, WorkAbility teaches students the “softer” employment skills—how to look for jobs and how to keep jobs. The program currently has 294 projects that serve schools in all of California's 58 counties.

Since the 1980s, IDEA has created a national mandate for transition services similar to WorkAbility. California, though, was first, and its WorkAbility grant has helped to inspire and guide this eventual federal mandate. WorkAbility is considered one of the ten best transition programs of its type in the nation and has received national recognition for its success in matching young adults with employers who need the kinds of skills they provide.

WorkAbility Is Not Transition

According to Ana Marsh, manager at the California Department of Education, WorkAbility suffers from a common misunderstanding: many people equate it with transition. WorkAbility's State Advisory Chair, Carol Gentili, shares Marsh's concern. "We are just a piece of the umbrella," says Gentili, referring to the overarching transition services and supports that all students with disabilities are legally entitled to—and need if they are to succeed in the adult world.

Since WorkAbility is a competitive grant program, any school district is eligible to apply for it as part of a repertoire of transition services. However "all schools and districts—whether or not they have a WorkAbility grant—are still responsible for providing transition planning and supports to students with disabilities," says Deborah Jacobs-Levine, former WorkAbility Mentor Chair. Adds Marsh, "Every student still deserves—and the law mandates—effective transition services."

Predictors of Post-School Employment Success

- Career awareness
- Community experiences
- Exit exam requirements/high school diploma status
- Inclusion in general education
- Interagency collaboration
- Occupational courses
- Paid employment/work experience
- Parental involvement
- Program of study
- Self-advocacy/self-determination
- Self-care/independent living
- Social skills
- Student support
- Transition program
- Vocational education
- Work study

—From Test, D. W., Mazzotti, V. L., Mustian, A. L., Kortering, L. J., & Kohler, P. H. (2009). "Evidence-based secondary transition predictors for improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities." *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* 32, 160–181.

A Sample of WorkAbility's Partnering Agencies

- California Community Colleges: www.cccco.edu
- California Department of Rehabilitation: www.rehab.cabwnet.gov
- California Diagnostic Centers: www.dc-cde.ca.gov/
- California Health Incentives Improvement Partnership (CHIIP): <http://chiip.org/>
- California Regional Centers: www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCList.cfm
- California State Council on Developmental Disabilities: www.scdd.ca.gov/
- California Working Disabled Program: www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/Pages/
- California Youth Leadership Forum: www.calylf.org/
- Project Search: <http://projectsearchca.org/>
- Youth Employment Partnership: www.yep.org/
- Youth Uprising: <http://youthuprising.org/>

Why WorkAbility Works

WorkAbility has been successful from the beginning because of the

practical good sense of what it tries to do: give high school students with disabilities customized, hands-on preparation for adult employment. And while concrete skills and activities that are clearly connected to the demands of the real world have great appeal for teenagers, the program also generates enthusiasm, commitment, and energy from the adults involved. Denice Welter, who chairs the Family Transition Network for WorkAbility, says, "I find this work so incredibly rewarding that I would do it for free. Every single day working with these students is a gift to me, it's so satisfying." She also sees WorkAbility as providing a "great bang for your buck." While the program cannot serve every student, "We serve thousands of kids each year," says Welter.

The goal of high school is to prepare all students for what comes next, whether that be postsecondary education, employment, or both. WorkAbility focuses on the world of work and helps students develop many of the skills that nearly every young adult will need to succeed in any job. "We tailor our efforts to students with disabilities who have IEPs [Individualized Education Programs]," says Welter. In general, that tailoring incorporates three basic components of a student's life: school, work, and important connections.

The school-based component involves activities that prepare students for the world of work and includes assessments and guidance to help students discover their strengths and interests; education in workplace etiquette; training in self-advocacy; and coaching in writing job applications, creating resumés, and interviewing for positions. The students then receive vocational and career or technical training for the specific skills they will need when they enter the workforce. Students end up with both "job-seeking" and "job-keeping" skills. The second component focuses on learning about the actual world of work; this involves such activities as job shadowing, internships and apprenticeships, school-based business projects, and actual employment. "Connecting" activities, the third component, involves matching a student with a mentor or job coach, along with helping a student's parents learn how to support their child in his or her life on the job.

Employment

WorkAbility creates opportunities for some students to work by paying their training wage. This benefit must adhere to Department of Labor requirements and is not appropriate for every student, but

when a training wage is possible it gives businesses an incentive to hire students, who in turn get a chance to practice their skills in a real-world setting. Whether or not it is able to match wages, the program works hard to create employment opportunities for all interested, qualified students, who then receive program support while on the job. WorkAbility Committee Chair for State and Regional Trainings, Susan Sklar, sees this support as the program's "first and best practice. We don't just put students in a job and leave them. We monitor them, make sure they know what's expected of them, and generally make sure the job is a good fit. We all keep track of our students for two years after they leave the program."

In Jacobs-Levine's experience, parents "sometimes don't want their children to be distracted by a job in high school. But a job is the best kind of experience for later life. That's what school is preparing a student for—a place in the workforce. Even a less-than-ideal job—flipping burgers, packing boxes, stapling papers—gives a teen practice in many of the workplace skills that transfer into a job or profession. Things like showing up on time and showing up every day, working hard, dressing appropriately, being congenial to the people around him. So

even if the job isn't perfect, almost any job that provides experience in these 'softer' skills is exactly what everyone needs in order to get a start in paid employment. These experiences can establish a foundation for a career."

Partnerships

Each WorkAbility program tailors its services to reflect not only the needs of its students but the resources in its community. The collaborative nature of the community partnerships that the program has developed and nourished over the years with businesses and organizations—all committed to helping young adults with disabilities gain work experience—is one of the many reasons for the program's success.

Petrina Alexander coordinates WorkAbility services for Oakland City Schools and also serves as state chair for WorkAbility's Human Support Services committee. "We all partner with local agencies," she says. "One of the many organizations we work with in Oakland is Youth Radio, which provides training to students who are interested in broadcasting. We have only so much money [in WorkAbility] and can't fund work-training opportunities for all of our students. So we connect students to other organizations, such as Youth Employment Partnerships. We also have strong relationships with the Oakland Unified School District's Programs for Exceptional Children Department and Marriott's Bridges From School to Work program. Bridges staff come into the schools and work with our students and give after-school workshops to prepare those students who are more ready to pursue a direct hire opportunity with an employer. [Bridges staff members] have even held parent outreach workshops."

The importance of collaborating and networking with organizations of all kinds emerges as a common refrain within WorkAbility. "It's the only way to keep abreast of what's going on" in the world of work and transition, says Alexander, "and it helps us recognize how small a piece of the transition puzzle WorkAbility is. There are so many other agencies helpful to us in the work we do, and we need to connect our students to them."

WorkAbility staff members also "work closely with businesses, both small and large, to create employment opportunities for participating students," according to Marsh. Hospitals, hardware stores, restaurants, computer companies . . . the list is long. And recent WorkAbility efforts are going beyond local agreements.

WorkAbility Tips for Parents

- Start talking about careers and adult choices when your child is young.
- As early as possible, give your child numerous opportunities to feel capable, take on responsibility, and have influence in decisions so that by the time your child turns 18, he or she knows the meaning of independence.
- Explore with your child (and for yourself) the many options that exist for occupations—college is only one choice.
- Get involved in all of your child's transition activities—from individualized education program meetings to career-interest assessments.
- Teach and practice with your child the use of public transportation.
- Involve your child, your family, and yourself in community activities that support recreation, exercise, and connection.
- Support your child's job-training and work efforts. Do not schedule conflicting events or duties that interfere with these activities.
- Allow your child to stumble and (yes) even fall—mistakes are a normal part of learning.

Gentili has secured a formal memorandum of understanding between WorkAbility and the corporate-level Chief Diversity Officer at CVS Pharmacy. This agreement, while not a mandate to hire, has made it a great deal easier—and even desirable—for any one of the 828 CVS stores in California to hire students through WorkAbility. And CVS represents one among many. On the Web site of any of the 300 individual WorkAbility programs in the state there are lists of hundreds of business partners.

These partnerships also extend to “postschool providers,” says Marsh. “Our projects work with students, school staff, and the various adult service providers—whether the Department of Rehabilitation, local Regional Centers, or others—coordinating information, placement, and collaboratives to help transition students. This [coordination] is another great WorkAbility asset.”

Internal Mentoring

The program was founded on the importance of taking advantage of lay expertise from every quarter,” says Jacobs-Levine. This was the genesis of WorkAbility’s mentoring system, which gives program directors and staff an extensive network of modeling, materials, and training. So while the program is focusing on helping students develop and improve their workplace skills, it is also regularly turning its attention inward to develop and improve the skills of its staff members.

Each of the five designated WorkAbility regions in the state has two dedicated mentors who plan trainings and develop materials to share with others in the field. “These mentors make sure the needs of the staff are being met. And they work with other mentors in planning regional meetings,” says Jacobs-Levine. These meetings also serve to maintain the WorkAbility culture “of support, sharing, and collaboration,” says Alexander. “It’s not about winning anything. Our success depends on how we all succeed.”

Sklar sees these meetings as just one more reason for WorkAbility’s success. “Our mission is to ensure quality professional development in all WorkAbility programs. We work hard to keep our trainings as relevant as possible and to make sure everyone gets the same information and is on the same page—although some of the best practices I use have come from just sharing ideas at our meetings. Everyone is willing to share. We all want to maintain the highest program standards,” says Sklar.

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High Standards

In addition to offering job development training so that staff members can better support students, the twice-yearly meetings offer staff trainings in the use of technology. WorkAbility’s reputation depends on its high standards, and technology has become central to maintaining these standards. “A state-level database was created specifically for WorkAbility sites to report on how each student is served,” says Alexander. This database records “who was placed in what job and what kind of services they were provided—before,

during, and after job placement. We are responsible for meeting our obligation to serve and place the number of students we were funded for.” The Focused Monitoring and Technical Assistance consultants from the California Department of Education then review all WorkAbility data—as well as budgets, end-of-year reports, and future plans—“so that everyone is in compliance, so that students are placed in jobs, and so that we are sure that all services are fully provided,” says Gloria Howard, WorkAbility’s Business, Education, and Labor committee chair.

WorkAbility is required to address nine areas for its students: (1) recruitment, (2) assessment, (3) counseling, (4) pre-employment skills training, (5) vocational training, (6) student wages for try-out employment, (7) placement in unsubsidized employment, (8) other assistance with transition to a quality adult life, and (9) the utilization of an interdisciplinary advisory committee to enhance project goals. Sites must reapply for funding every year, and that funding is directly tied to how well each of these elements is addressed for each student.

The Future

Kids with disabilities have had mixed success in school. We want them to have a good first experience in real-life work,” says Jacobs-Levine. Satisfying work is important for almost every adult; it contributes to a sense of worth, competence, and independence; and it keeps individuals connected to the larger community. However, the current distressed economy is making it increasingly difficult for most job seekers to find work, regardless of their talents or qualifications. Programs such as WorkAbility give young adults with disabilities a chance to compete in this job market by helping them develop the experience, skills, and relationships they need to enter the workforce—knowledgeable about their strengths, confident in their abilities, and ready to work.

Additional Information

To learn more about WorkAbility I and its regions, committees, and array of services, visit the following:

www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/srl/wrkabltlyI.asp