



# Case Studies

## Student Transition to Employment Project (STEP): Certifying Teachers as Vendors for Transition-Age Students with Developmental Disabilities

West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services

### Abstract

The Student Transition to Employment Project (STEP) provides training for teachers and aides from various county schools to become certified vendors with the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services (WVDRS). This process allows for a smooth transition from school to work for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Students continue the transition process with adult professionals whom they already know and trust, and who are familiar with all aspects of the student's life. This effort is a partnership between WVDRS, Vocational Services, Inc. (VSI) (a community rehabilitation provider), and special education staff in 24 West Virginia counties. Solely funded by the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council (WVDDC) for the first three years, WVDRS is currently providing joint funding for STEP. As of February 2012, 75 teachers have become registered as certified vendors and 73 students have entered employment through this project.

### Background

In West Virginia, students with IDD may be referred to a community rehabilitation provider (CRP) from WVDRS shortly before graduating from high school. While many students may have participated in school-to-work programs and have experience in different job settings, a referral to the CRP generally marks the start of the employment process. Often any initial steps towards employment taken during the student's high school career are not taken into consideration when the student applies for jobs after graduation. In 2007, the coordinator of the Kanawha County Schools Work Exploration Program approached the WVDRS program manager of CRP services with an idea to use secondary special education teachers and aides as adult service vendors. Because of previous experience using teachers as vendors, the coordinator proposed the model could address a gap in employment service delivery for transition-age youth with IDD. According to key informants, the coordinator reviewed the program's effectiveness and proposed that teachers become

This case study is an excerpt of a larger report, entitled "Case Studies of Emerging/Innovative Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Practices in Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Intellectual/Development Disabilities" from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Vocational Rehabilitation at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. The full report can be found at [vr-rrtc.org](http://vr-rrtc.org). Its suggested citation is:

Burns, R., Haines, K., Porter, E., Boeltzig, H. & Foley, S. (2013). Case Studies of Emerging/Innovative Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Practices in Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

sole-proprietor vendors for students in 10th grade and above. The state's rural geography makes it difficult to adequately provide vendor services. Sole-proprietor vendors offered a solution. A proposal was submitted to the WVDDC and a grant was awarded to pilot the STEP program.

According to project participants, the program is filling a gap for students otherwise overlooked when leaving school. Many who have participated in STEP are those who would not typically have obtained adult services. The vendor services provided do not conflict with those provided by CRPs. There was some initial trepidation about teacher-vendors taking away some CRP business. Yet, key informants reported the project increased service capacity. Pre-existing relationships with WVDRS were influential in determining in which counties the STEP program would begin. Originally, students in the school-to-work programs were given the option to continue working towards employment with teachers they already knew and trusted through STEP. Eventually, the program expanded to include other schools due to growing interest among teachers, students, and their families. WVDRS makes it clear to students that STEP is one option for students and that other postsecondary options also should be presented and discussed.<sup>1</sup> WVDRS and WVDDC have provided funds for STEP. The program continues to serve

<sup>1</sup> Community Access, Incorporated (2010). STEP Training Manual, WV. Community Access, Inc. Copy obtained from key informant.

students with IDD while broadening its focus to include students from other disability groups as well.

## Purpose and Goals of STEP

The purpose is to provide a seamless transition from school to work for graduating students with IDD and other types of disabilities. Contracted teachers working with Work Exploration and other special-education programs become sole-proprietor vendors for WVDRS to provide transition services to students who are VR customers. The goal is to significantly increase employment outcomes among transition-age students.

## Implementation of STEP

**Student eligibility:** Participating students need to be interested in working and be eligible for VR services. They also need to have consistent and reliable transportation. Related support services need to be in place including long-term supports if needed. This funding is provided via extended supported employment service dollars for unfunded individuals or a Medicaid Waiver for individuals who qualify. This funding is only available for students closed into supported employment and needing ongoing support.<sup>2</sup> A strong support network is crucial to helping students succeed. This network includes students' parents, guardians, and other individuals who know them well. One benefit of the teachers is the familiarity and trusting relationship already in place prior to the job search.

### Referral to the STEP program and VR

Participation in STEP is based on student choice and is an option in transition plans for all students. WVDRS school counselors are assigned to each of the 55 county school districts in West Virginia and identify students eligible for WVDRS services. In other cases, a teacher with whom the student has worked may identify the student as a potential candidate for STEP and refer the student to WVDRS. WVDRS is notified if the student is interested. The student, the teacher, and the WVDRS counselor meet to determine WVDRS eligibility if the student is not yet a client. Students may also self-refer.

## Roles and responsibilities of teacher vendors, recruitment, and contracting

### Roles and responsibilities

Teacher vendors for WVDRS are responsible for providing job development, short-term job coaching, and job follow-up to students. They are expected to complete a CRP Service Plan and a Job Placement Plan together with the students, their families, and the WVDRS school counselor. These plans outline the goals, objectives, and strategies that will ensure that the services and supports provided meet the student's employment needs. In cases where students are placed in supported employment, CRPs will step in and provide ongoing follow-up when necessary. Any employment service provided by the teacher beyond the scope of a school-to-work program, if the student is enrolled, is considered to be part of the teacher vendor's job. Any employment service provided by the teacher vendor outside of a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is considered to be the teacher vendor's job.

If a student is enrolled in the school-to-work program, employment goals may also be included in their IEP. However, if job coaching and other employment-related services are not included in a student's IEP, these services must occur after school hours and the teacher vendor will be paid for them. Job-development, coaching, and follow-up services for employment often take place on weekends, evenings, and, mainly, throughout the summer. If additional support is needed after the summer months, teacher vendors may continue to work with the students after the school day or during the weekend. The WVDRS counselor or CRPs may step in to offer additional support.

Two participating vendors who already had experience with school-to-work programs discussed the ease of incorporating STEP into their workload. One teacher vendor found that the typical activities during the school year made for a seamless transition for placing the student in a job during the summer months. Another teacher vendor added that, due to collaboration and coordination with WVDRS counselors and families during the school year, time management was not an issue.

CRPs would gather community assessment information about a student already known by the teacher who has direct involvement with the student. A key informant said: "It kind of made the process a little quicker because you

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

weren't at a totally starting over point." Such information includes the student's interests and goals, what kind of job would be a good match for the student, what kind of job the student wants to pursue, and what abilities and strengths the student possesses that will enable him or her to succeed in a job. It is common for students working with a teacher vendor to graduate ready to work, and to have identified a vocational goal and specific job. Some students graduate with applications ready to send to job positions.

The partnership between teacher vendors and WVDRS counselors has flourished since the founding of STEP. This improved relationship is largely due to the development of open and fluid communication. One teacher vendor commented on the impact of increased communication: "We've had a good relationship... [because] we'll talk about some different aspects [of the program] and how we can be successful in this program. We're very close as far as keeping in contact." An increase in communication has resulted in the development of a trusting relationship between teacher vendors and WVDRS.

### Recruitment and contracting

Teachers must be working in the school system as part of a Work Exploration or other special-education program. Each year, participating schools host a meeting led by STEP staff to introduce the program to teachers who may be interested in becoming vendors. The project coordinator, accompanied by teacher vendors and WVDRS school transition counselors, holds orientation meetings for interested teachers. A general overview of the project is provided, including its purposes, goals, and requirements, and the process for becoming a vendor for WVDRS. Teacher vendors discuss their individual experiences with the program. A key informant elaborated, "We talk to [educators from different WV counties] about how we go about working with these kids and how we go about working with the WVDRS counselors. It's all about teamwork. If we get everybody involved, it makes it a lot easier."

### Vendor training to provide transition and related services

Teachers who are interested in becoming vendors are invited to participate in a special training program on how to provide effective transition and related services to students. Interested teachers also have the opportunity to shadow counties currently participating in STEP. The new vendors file the necessary paperwork to operate a business, submit the

paperwork to WVDRS, obtain professional liability insurance, and receive information on paying all the necessary taxes.<sup>3</sup> Teachers attend trainings to become vendors providing effective transition and related services to students. These trainings are conducted by a variety of individuals, including staff employed by WVDRS, Social Security Work Incentives and Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) Programs, and staff from the Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC).

Staff in counties with school-to-work programs require less training on basic aspects of job coaching, job development, and community-based education, as they already have familiarity with employment services for students with disabilities. Teachers participate in training that consists of five modules: a) Building Business Relationships and Job Development, b) Job Coaching, c) WOTC (tax credit opportunity), d) WVDRS; and e) Social Security Administration Work Incentives.<sup>4</sup> These training modules are offered to all teacher vendors in person. A STEP representative is always present and provides additional support and training to teacher vendors if needed. A WVDRS representative is often present as well, especially for the WVDRS training module. Some teachers have acted as mentors for new teacher vendors. All trainings are held after school in two-hour blocks, with the exception of the VCU-RRTC training, which lasts two days. Building Business Relationships and Job Development focuses on the importance of networking. Job Coaching focuses on responsibility to aid a student at his or her new job, to advocate for the student, to analyze expected tasks, and to develop job accommodations. The WOTC training informs teachers about the tax-credit opportunity that provides an incentive for employers to hire individuals with disabilities.<sup>5</sup> The WVDRS training provides information on the VR system and process. Training is provided on policy and procedure, forms, expectations, definitions of services, and expectations of how those services are to be delivered. This training emphasizes both supported placement and direct placement. Social Security Administration Work Incentives provides information on the 2010 Red Book and the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs.<sup>6</sup> Trainings also discuss effective ways for teacher vendors to partner and work with WVDRS counselors.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Funding of the STEP program

The STEP program is funded through WVDRS and WVDDC dollars, each serving different regions of the state. Having two grants has allowed the project to train more teachers from more counties in less time. Both projects use the same methodology, and all placements are made through the local WVDRS counselor. The grant money from WVDRS and WVDDC is used only to fund the training component of the STEP program. Key informants believe STEP is sustainable without the need for continuous grant funding once trainings for teacher vendors have taken place and structures are established for program continuation. The key components for STEP (i.e., motivated special educators and VR training funds) are already in place throughout all states.

Many of the teachers trained in the first three years have worked each summer as independent vendors with transitioning high school students. STEP hopes to receive one more year of grant funding to finalize mechanisms, including the teacher vendor-training manual that would allow the project to be self-sustaining. WVDRS pays on a fee-for-service basis. They receive a \$600 fee and additional fees for milestones of follow up after one week of employment, and then at 30 days, 60 days, and 90 days. Teachers may receive \$50 an hour for up to two hours for face-time planning and additional fees for short-term job coaching at \$40 an hour.

## Project Outcomes and Future of the Practice

As of February 2012, 24 counties had received training, 75 teachers were certified as vendors, and 73 students had been employed. The top three industries for job placements were hotel and motel work, food service, and retail. About 25 of the 55 counties have school-to-work programs. STEP has been most successful in retaining teacher vendors involved with Work Exploration. As the program has expanded to other counties without school-to-work programs, there have been problems with teachers not following through and not providing services to students after receiving training to become certified vendors. Key informants attributed this to the workload being higher than anticipated, the need to continue providing services after the summer months, and unfamiliarity with job development. As the program continues, staff will focus on identifying school system staff and counties that are the best fit for the program to ensure its success.

There is anecdotal evidence from successful teacher vendors

that the program is effective in finding employment for students, even in challenging situations. For example, one teacher found employment for three students in a county with high unemployment rates. Another found employment for three students coming from a school that did not have a school-to-work program. A third teacher found employment for a student who had to rely on sparse public transportation for getting to work. To encourage positive change, the project manager and the program manager of CRP services at WVDRS have created a venue for current teacher vendors to meet and discuss their involvement in STEP. STEP staff and WVDRS staff has also presented the program to the WVDDC, at statewide transition conferences and meetings, and for school districts and other groups in the transition and special education fields. The staff hopes to increase the program's exposure and impact through these efforts.

### INTERVIEWEES

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The VR-RRTC, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, is a five-year cooperative agreement with the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of the US Department of Education, Grant # H133B070001.