

Experts document progress under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act benefiting students with disabilities

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Ten years ago, the United States passed into federal law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), broadening the mandate of

state vocational rehabilitation agencies to facilitate successful school-to-work transitions for student populations. Among its many provisions, the measure provided an unparalleled opportunity to expand the scope of available experiences and training to help students with disabilities prepare for competitive integrated employment.

A [special issue](#) of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* explores the state-of-the-art of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) practices, and scholarship. The issue also highlights promising innovations evolving within the field and recommendations for policymakers, state leaders, researchers, and practitioners with the intention to level the persistently disproportionate rate of unemployment among people with disabilities.

"After a decade of planning and implementing Pre-ETS, we have reached a timely juncture to parse out what has and has not been accomplished as a result of the landmark legislation—WIOA. This is vital for envisioning pathways for future refinement through policy implementation and reauthorization," said Holly N. Whittenburg, Ph.D., who served as the issue's Guest Editor with Joshua P. Taylor, Ph.D. Dr. Whittenburg and Dr. Taylor are both affiliated with the Department of Teaching and Learning, Washington State University.

In the accompanying editorial, the Guest Editors succinctly lay out the key issues and challenges covered in the collection of articles.

"Taken as a whole, the articles in this issue represent a comprehensive set of insights into a system in flux, as well as offer best practices in refining and guiding effective Pre-ETS delivery. Our hope is they illuminate both where we currently are in terms of Pre-ETS implementation and point the way forward to the types of innovation, programming, and systems changes that will allow us to significantly improve the trajectories of youth with disabilities as they move from

school to work," explained Dr. Taylor.

The research presented articulates a need for targeted technical assistance, support, and innovation that fits the specific contexts of individual states and communities.

According to Dr. Whittenburg, lead author of an article on how state vocational rehabilitation agencies are responding to the unique needs and contexts of their states and local communities, "States continue to face a considerable challenge in designing and delivering effective Pre-ETS programs."

She and her colleagues provide a broad view of how the service delivery patterns among the states differ in the type of Pre-ETS provided, how many services were provided to each recipient, disability characteristics of students, and provider types.

"State differences in Pre-ETS implementation require further research to investigate [best practices](#) within and across states. Additional differentiated training and technical assistance models aligned with these state-level differences are needed."

She cited the unfortunate trend that work-based learning experiences—supported by the strongest research data—are received least frequently by students, "There's still a lot of work to be done to better align what's happening in the field with what actually works."

"Many states are still struggling to spend the required 15% budget allotment each year for Pre-ETS, and so millions of federal dollars are not put to good use," noted Paul Wehman, Ph.D., Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*.

A contribution by Dr. Wehman and colleagues offers a comprehensive set of recommendations for how Pre-ETS could more effectively provide a foundation for achieving competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities, focusing on expanding effective partnerships, rethinking professional development and training, and building and proliferating models of success.

"In moving into a second decade of WIOA, we must find ways to coordinate service delivery more effectively with partners, strengthen relationships with schools, and engage with employers, families, and others. Additional research and knowledge translation is needed to pollinate the best ideas and approaches across states and communities," he explained.

Other articles in the collection point to additional recommendations for future success: identify effective approaches to evaluating/assessing services delivery in terms of student access and service types; guide a shift toward Pre-ETS delivery models that are successful in providing high-quality services to expanding student populations across different contexts; and develop targeted technical support and training that supports implementation of the approaches most likely to achieve the goals of Pre-ETS and WIOA.

An important objective of Pre-ETS is to leverage additional support from and engagement with vocational rehabilitation programs to provide more meaningful transition activities from an earlier age.

Another recommendation is to provide Pre-ETS within a stages of learning framework where students start by exploring career interests and subsequently move to more meaningful, community-based work experiences before they graduate.

More information: Joshua P. Taylor et al, Introduction to the special issue: Examining the impact of pre-employment transition services, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2024). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-240001](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-240001)

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