Discussion

Building a foundation for competitive integrated employment: What does the future hold for pre-employment transition services

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Abstract. One of the more creative aspects of the Workforce Innovation Opportunities Act (WIOA, 2014) is the pre-employment transition services program (Pre-ETS). In WIOA, for the first time a federal rehabilitation law has been reauthorized to include a requirement that 15% of the state case management service funding must be devoted to Pre-ETS activities. However, a significant number of state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies have been unable to spend this required 15% and therefore millions and millions of dollars nationally have been returned to the Rehabilitation Services Administration. In this paper, we describe how Pre-ETS can be used to get youth with disabilities into competitive and integrated employment, while also outlining many of the systems challenges related to these efforts—specifically for VR and schools. We also provide recommendations for the future to improve outcomes by making Pre-ETS work more effectively.

Keywords: Transition, employment, policy, vocational rehabilitation, special education

1. Introduction

One of the more creative aspects of the Workforce Innovation Opportunities Act (WIOA, 2014) is the pre-employment transition services program (Pre-ETS). For many years, vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and high schools have been encouraged by Congress to work together in order to promote competitive integrated employment (CIE) and quality independent living. In WIOA, for the first time a federal rehabilitation law has been reauthorized to include a requirement that 15% of the state case management service funding must be devoted to Pre-ETS activities. In theory this is a great idea—having the counselors work directly with school transition specialists and high school teachers to promote employment outcomes. What could be wrong with that? This is a tremendously helpful idea and novel

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approach to improving outcomes. However, after several years of implementation, Pre-ETS in practice have fallen short of that good idea. In fact, a significant number of state VR agencies have been unable to spend this required 15% and therefore millions and millions of dollars nationally have been returned to the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

There are many reasons for this dilemma when considering that it was 2014 when WIOA was passed, even with the benefit of hindsight. Hence a major purpose of this paper is to discuss what these challenges are for implementation from the perspectives of VR counselors and also special education teachers. We must hear from these parties who are ultimately charged with implementing this major initiative. We must also address these challenges with suggested solutions and recommendations which we will do in this paper. Finally, we must understand what is currently working in the field and where problems and issues continue to arise.

Essentially, the 5 components of Pre-ETS are: 1) job exploration counseling, 2) work-based learning, including internships, 3) counseling on how to access a postsecondary program such as a college or career or technical school, 4) workplace readiness training, and 5) instruction in self-advocacy. These are all good transition practices and should be utilized in high school. These are the components which need to be implemented consistently for Pre-ETS to be successful.

2. Getting and keeping a job

Getting and keeping a job, and later identifying a career path, are critical steps to establishing independence in adulthood and integration in the community. Students need to develop an understanding of the relationships among work responsibility, pay, and getting along with others (Kregel et al., 2020). CIE is increasingly viewed as a key indicator of postsecondary success for all graduates (Roux et al. 2015; Wehman et al., 2014). As noted above, recent passage of WIOA requires that Pre-ETS be provided for all potentially eligible students with disabilities; this means that transition specialists and high school teachers will be responsible for incorporating employment skills training into the curriculum, as well as collaborating with VR agencies (Taylor et al., 2019). Research has shown that paid and unpaid work opportunities prior to graduation are a significant predictor of the ability to get and keep a job for

adults with disabilities (Carter, et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2014). Partnerships with businesses are also important to ensure that students have ample opportunities for work experiences that are aligned with their interests and strengths. The following case study, the story of Marcus, offers a hypothetical scenario showing how goals and instruction related to developing employment skills could be integrated into a student's education plan and facilitate the Individual Transition Plan.

2.1. Marcus

Marcus is a high-school student who has been labeled as having a moderate intellectual disability which affects many aspects of learning, social interaction, and independent adaptive skills. For much of his educational career, Marcus has had a close teacher supervision throughout his school day. As a result, his family has expressed concern about his level of independence and self-determination as he prepares to enter adulthood. Marcus is a senior this year, and, like his peers, he is getting ready for graduation. However, based on the concerns about self-determination raised by his parents and others from his IEP team, although he will walk at graduation with his peers, Marcus will return to school next year to continue to gain employment experience and continue to work toward satisfying the academic requirements of a standard diploma. The IEP team employed a person-centered approach in creating a transition plan that identified Marcus' preference to work using computers in a high-tech field after graduation. He now participates in a STEM-focused internship through a vocational training program hosted by a nearby private research laboratory, where his support staff have emphasized self-determination using a structured prompt hierarchy, including wait time, and a reinforcement system to encourage his independence. As a result, he has moved from waiting on prompts from staff to following a task analysis of responsibilities on his own and seeking out coworkers for help when needed. Marcus and his team now feel confident that he is on the path to achieving the goals he set for himself after graduation.

The team agreed that Marcus would begin by participating in the STEM-internship training program based or a number of factors, including the fact that Marcus enjoys using computers at home and likes to talk about space travel and new scientific discoveries that he learns about on YouTube and social media. In a life-skills class, Marcus' favorite activities are

Table 1
Examples of skills marcus will learn in the vocational training program

Teaching environment	Skills to learn
School	Time management
	Putting on work uniform
	Self-monitoring
Bus/transit stop	Using a map
	Navigating directions on foot
	Reading schedule times
Bus/subway	Calculating/paying fare
	Communicating with officials and strangers
	Navigating transit system
Internship site (general)	Clocking in and out using staff computer
	Talking with supervisor and coworkers
	Following work schedule and routine
Dining room	Restocking condiments
	Cleaning tables
	Communicating with customers
Break room	Interacting with coworkers using mobile phone

data entry and filing clean equipment in the school chemistry lab. There are several businesses on the same public bus line as his house and many others within the range of the local paratransit provider that relate to his interests in working in a science or tech field. Finally, situational assessment results revealed that Marcus seems to enjoy different tasks in the internship setting, such as clerical work, cleaning equipment, and stocking supplies in laboratory spaces. His teacher will use systematic instruction to provide training to Marcus and three other students for 4 hours a day. Table 1 shows examples of skills that Marcus will learn in different environments.

The development of pre-employment skills is an important part of transition preparation for secondary students. As demonstrated in Marcus' case study, effective career education and experiences require coordination of multiple activities, each aligned with the individual's strengths and interests. For those responsible for setting up work experiences and helping students locate work, developing knowledge of the labor market, as well as partnerships with local businesses, is the first step in ensuring that students have needed opportunities prior to graduation. After getting to know students' strengths and interests, using a person-centered approach to match work experiences with those preferences will lead to better outcomes and promote self-determination (Shogren et al., 2016).

3. Community living: Getting around, getting connected, and accessing services

Community living skills broadly describe the knowledge and competencies required to engage with, navigate, and be integrated into the many functions of community life, and are often grouped into broad clusters, such as domestic skills, mobility skills, activities of daily living, social interactions, and communication. For Marcus to get to work, behave appropriately and take advantage of the new job, Pre-ETS skills (see Table 2) are essential.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guarantees access for people with disabilities to all parts of their community, including not only physical universal design features like ramps and curb cuts but also adaptive transportation and telecommunication options. Travel skills are extremely important because they enable community access and participation for the student. Although the ADA addresses only accessibility, instruction and support are also needed to improve the mobility of persons with disabilities in the community. Getting to and from various destinations within the community is a major aspect of transitioning from childhood dependence to adulthood independence. Unfortunately, this goal is often ignored by educators and left to family members or others. Transportation goals need to reflect a continuum of mobility options, ranging from the selection of an appropriate wheelchair to the design and purchase of a specially equipped vehicle. This may include teaching students such topics and skills as knowing their rights under ADA, self-advocacy, developing a personalized transportation plan, and identifying needed accommodations and assistive technology. Table 2 shows a brief sampling of skill and activities that might be relevant to teaching students within various areas of the community.

As shown in the Tables 1 and 2, the activities needed to develop skills in areas of community life vary greatly, especially between individuals and between localities. However, Pre-ETS are a good source for helping youth gain these skills and engage in valuable community-based training. For example, a young person living in an urban area who loves attending sporting events will need skills and experiences related to using public transportation and navigating to the stadium, whereas an individual with a physical disability in a more rural community who is engaged in her church will need a different set of skills, including accessing paratransit options. This brief case study and tables demonstrate how the five

Table 2
Community living skills: Examples of curriculum areas and activities

Curriculum area	Activities and skills
Shopping	Purchasing hygiene products at pharmacy Purchasing meal ingredients at grocery store
Recreation	Joining a local gym
	Volunteering at a local animal rescue shelter
	Researching show times at a local cinema
Restaurants	Ordering at a fast-food or service restaurant
	Meal etiquette
	Paying for meal
Finance	Applying for a part-time job
	Opening a checking account
	Using an ATM
Medical services	Scheduling a doctor's appointment
	Locating the office
	Checking in upon arriving at the doctor
Public spaces	Engaging in conversation with others
	Interacting with strangers
	Asking for assistance
Transportation and safety	Setting up paratransit pick-up/drop-off
	Using a mobile device for navigation
	Using public transportation

Pre-ETS components can be utilized in helping a student like Marcus. However, many challenges arise in implementation and how to approach them occurs next.

4. Components of pre-ETS programming: Implementation challenges

While the passage of WIOA and allocation of funding specifically focused on transition services brought great promise for addressing the needs of students with disabilities, it has been faced with challenges in how those services are implemented. The required activities defining service provision clearly respond to what we know are important elements of the transition process that when delivered effectively, can result in desired post-school outcomes. Unfortunately, the realities impacting education and adult service systems in providing transition services prior to WIOA were not automatically resolved afterwards and continue to pose issues with implementation at the local level. As a result, significant discrepancies are evident related to the quality, frequency, and scope of Pre-ETS across schools, districts, and states. The need to address the issues associated with implementation

are critical to ensure all students are benefitting from the possibilities afforded by Pre-ETS. Questions continue to persist related to what needs to be provided, how they are provided, and who is responsible for providing Pre-ETS services.

The value of job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, instruction in self-advocacy, and counseling on post-secondary education opportunities in transition programming are evident. However, the lack of procedural guidelines, curricular content, and specific strategies illustrating effective practices have resulted in many varied activities provided under the umbrella of Pre-ETS. These may include paper and pencil worksheets, large group classes, and outdated trainings that are readily available, easy to provide, or promoted as meeting requirements—though often not reflective of what we know works best. Perhaps of greatest concern is the limited provision of work-based learning opportunities, perhaps one of the most valuable components for CIE outcomes. Schools struggle with how to develop business opportunities, carve time out of the school day for students to be in the community, and manage the logistics of transportation, scheduling, and staffing. A lack of administrative support and limited resources often compound the challenges.

It is not uncommon for rehabilitation counselors to commission Pre-ETS from community rehabilitation providers who have responsibility for some or all of the required activities. Unfortunately, for many communities, the shortage of available providers or the lack of adequate staffing by existing providers leads to infrequent and inconsistent practices within schools, particularly those in rural areas. Many of the logistics faced by teachers, such as pulling students from their class schedules and coordinating with providers to ensure effective instructional strategies and supports, continue to present issues for all parties. Family confusion and a need for engagement are also identified as difficult factors. Concerns are often raised regarding the absence of guidance and accountability by VR, resulting in cursory service provision lacking use of evidence-based practices that contribute to post-school outcomes. The lack of coordination, communication, and problem solving frequently experienced by communities contributes to difficulties with the integration of Pre-ETS into the transition process across school and adult service systems.

WIOA's intent to expand transition service delivery to reach potentially eligible students with disabilities at an earlier age and include services to students with

more significant disabilities has brought significant change and challenges to communities. The successful implementation of Pre-ETS requires a strong framework of collaboration between schools, VR, students, families, and businesses. Research reveals the importance of effective collaboration in predicting positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Pacheco, 2022). Despite the findings and importance of effective relationships between various transition stakeholders, challenges persist in developing and maintaining essential partnerships critical for Pre-ETS activities. Building and maintaining relationships takes time and often requires a commitment and shared responsibility for developing better ways of providing services that address the issues one or more partners are experiencing. Frequently finding a common time can be difficult for both school representatives and VR counselors to meet and align strategies, objectives, and plans for services. The effect can be felt across referrals, access to services, communication, and dissemination of information. Furthermore, identifying student needs, establishing a sequence of services to enhance skills and college and career readiness, and the coordination of activities both mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and WIOA are impacted by a lack of collaboration.

Effective implementation of Pre-ETS relies heavily on the knowledge and preparedness of stakeholders involved. Several studies have highlighted the need for training and education among educators, rehabilitation counselors, and families to ensure a smooth transition process. For example, Taylor's study in 2016 found that special education teachers require training on the transition process, with a focus on providing information about access to VR. This lack of knowledge and information often contributes to confusion and misunderstandings affecting the effectiveness of transition planning. Recent research such as Lau and McKelvey's study in 2023, also identified the pressing need for training among VR counselors and families. Rehabilitation counselors require more training in teaching younger students and those with significant disabilities, while families express a desire to learn more about VR services. Lambert's (2023) findings revealed that educators and families want to know what types of Pre-ETS activities are offered, and rehabilitation counselors seek more knowledge on classroom management and lesson planning. Furthermore, the lack of understanding among schools, families, and Pre-ETS providers about their respective roles and responsibilities in the delivery of Pre-ETS also contributes to misunderstanding about VR services. Family respondents have expressed a need for more information on how to increase their collaboration and the services provided though Pre-ETS. Educators and families also face challenges with knowing whom to contact when making a Pre-ETS or VR referral, when to initiate contact, and what services are available.

Schools and VR often use varying online platforms for communication and collaboration which restricts the seamless sharing of student progress notes and goals. This makes it difficult to exchange pertinent data and resources effectively and efficiently which is crucial for optimizing the collaboration between schools, rehabilitation counselors, students, and families. Poor coordination often affects the streamlining of communication, organizing and managing the amount of information exchanged, and preventing duplication of services during the transition process. Additionally, the lack of shared data contributes to challenges associated with longitudinal tracking and evaluation of student outcomes to determine the impact of Pre-ETS and inform program improvement. It is important to also gather and review implementation data to identify effective practices and areas with challenges so that targeted interventions and modifications can be made to enhance Pre-ETS delivery. The lack of data presents a missed opportunity for learning from those communities that are doing well and advancing strategies and knowledge translation efforts that can positively impact Pre-ETS access, services, and outcomes for all students.

5. VR provider perspectives on pre-ETS

In addition to these general challenges, Pre-ETS components of WIOA introduced tremendous opportunities for VR agencies to expand on their mission to promote CIE, as well as significant challenges. These challenges include a shift in the role and focus of agency staff, expansion in VR service delivery to a larger population of potentially eligible youth, and the need to form new and deeper collaborative partnerships. Ten years after passage of WIOA, these mandates still present challenges for VR in implementing Pre-ETS requirements to fulfill the intent of the law in promoting CIE. In this section, we propose recommendations for how VR can expand training and technical assistance efforts, effectively shift the roles and responsibilities of agency and related staff

and build evidence-based models of Pre-ETS implementation.

5.1. Collaboration with partners

One of the primary functions of WIOA was to expand the expectations for collaboration of VR agencies at both the state and local level (Awsumb et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). Collaborative partners include employers, state and local education agencies, institutes of higher education, families, and other state agencies (Taylor et al., 2021). VR agencies have substantially expanded engagement with employers in the years immediately following passage of WIOA (GAO, 2018). Given its focus on potentially eligible transition-age youth, VR partnerships with education are key to the success of Pre-ETS programming and implementation. To be effective, these collaborative efforts must go beyond attending IEP and person-centered planning meetings and should start earlier in students' career planning (Lambert et al., 2023). Although Pre-ETS providers largely describe their collaboration with school staff as extensive and beneficial, their school counterparts are less positive in their assessment of this collaboration (Awsumb et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2021). Even within service delivery, Carlson et al. (2020) found that just under half of sampled state agencies had identified personnel responsible for coordination of services in the first half decade of WIOA implementation. State agencies have wide discretion in the extent to which VR counselors and other vendor providers support the delivery of Pre-ETS (Awsumb et al., 2020). However, the Identification of potentially eligible youth remains to be an issue for many states, with many agencies reporting Pre-ETS receipt by students without documented disabilities (Carlson et al., 2020; Whittenburg et al., 2024).

5.2. Challenges faced by VR

Even after a decade, implementation of Pre-ETS continues to present several challenges to VR. The shifting role and focus of VR toward a younger and broader population and expanded service types has resulted in substantial innovation, albeit unevenly across states and localities (Taylor et al., 2021). Many state VR agencies still struggle to incorporate evidence-based approaches into Pre-ETS and transition services (Whittenburg et al., 2023). Despite the evidence behind work-based learning experiences and self-advocacy instruction, VR professionals lack

training and are less likely to select these services (Oertle et al., 2017). Building relationships and rapport with schools is also among the primary and ongoing challenges faced by VR related to Pre-ETS implementation (Taylor et al., 2021). Awsumb et al. (2020) found that Pre-ETS providers identified several barriers to collaboration including: time scarcity, financial scarcity, service coordination difficulty with schools, low priority from schools, and other competing priorities. One of the intents of WIOA was situating Pre-ETS as a series of preparatory activities to individualized VR services (for those found eligible) and eventually CIE. However, one of the critical challenges of WIOA implementation is this pipeline from Pre-ETS to individualized VR services to achieving CIE. To date, too few Pre-ETS are being provided to intended recipients despite efforts such as memoranda of understanding, shared data agreements, and other means of identification and referral (Taylor et al., 2021). Perhaps more troubling, of those who receive Pre-ETS, less than half go on to receive individualized VR services (Whittenburg et al., 2024). These challenges continue to stymie the potential of VR and limit the opportunities to foster more effective Pre-ETS programming and more robust collaborative relationships with schools.

6. Special educator perspectives on Pre-ETS

6.1. Importance of school-VR collaboration

Although much of its mandates are the responsibility of VR, enactment of WIOA was a significant step forward in fostering systematic collaboration between schools and VR agencies to improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. This collaboration starts with WIOA-mandated coordination between VR agencies and schools in the planning and implementation of Pre-ETS. The role of secondary special educators has been critical in this process. Special educators are responsible for not only academic instruction but also for providing individualized support, collaborating with agency staff, and actively participating in gathering student progress data and sharing information to monitor performance and plan for the next steps toward student's postsecondary goals. Therefore, it is important to examine the perspectives of secondary special educators concerning pre-ETS, in order to identify challenges and make meaningful recommendations to improve Pre-ETS delivery.

Research involving special educators and other stakeholders has highlighted how special educators view collaboration between schools and VR agencies as essential in delivering effective Pre-ETS and providing real benefits to students (Carter et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). Effective collaboration between schools and VR agencies is crucial in determining feasible approaches to delivering Pre-ETS that incorporate the unique interests of students and sequence them in such a way that students develop the skills and knowledge needed to achieve their post-school goals. However, some special educators report challenges related to the need for increased collaboration and coordination, additional training and resources, multiple time constraints, and difficulty engaging students and parents (Lau & McKelvey, 2023; Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services; 2022).

There is also a need for clear communication in building stronger collaboration between partners, including families. Special educators have expressed needs for training in effective communication processes, communicating pre-ETS information to families (Pacheco et al., 2022), and increasing communication with VR counselors (Lambert et al., 2023). Family engagement is also critical in supporting successful student outcomes during the transition process. However, enhanced family involvement can only occur if educators are familiar with Pre-ETS and can effectively describe it to families. Unfortunately, according to a recent study by Carter and colleagues (2021), less than half of special educators surveyed knew how to describe Pre-ETS to families.

6.2. Logistics of collaboration

We must also consider how Pre-ETS can be delivered in ways that maximize student skill and career development and work well within existing school structures and requirements. In other words, effective Pre-ETS delivery should complement and enhance special education transition planning and activities. To do this, VR staff need to work collaboratively with school staff to identify specific Pre-ETS students who would benefit from and are not already being provided, determine specific approaches to Pre-ETS instruction and activities that work with school and student schedules and requirements, and establish ongoing methods for sharing data on student progress (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, n.d.).

Yet special educators continue to report specific concerns related to these logistical aspects of Pre-ETS delivery. For instance, they have questions about how to fit Pre-ETS delivery within the school day, given schools' focus on academic courses and requirements (Carter et al., 2021). Special educators indicate that there is often a lack of agencies and providers available to deliver Pre-ETS and that availability issues may be exacerbated in rural communities and at the middle school level (Carter et al., 2021). They also express a need for additional training and support to better understand how to navigate the often-complex VR system, including understanding application and consent processes and available services (Zhang et al., 2023).

7. Recommendations for future improvements to pre-ETS implementation

As we consider these challenges and concerns related to Pre-ETS implementation, action is needed to build off successes and address these issues. We present three recommendations for improvement of this system: (a) expanding effective partnerships, (b) rethinking professional development and training, and (c) building and proliferating models of success.

7.1. Expanding effective partnerships

Expansion of business outreach and engagement with employers is critical to the success of Pre-ETS and VR services in general (Tansey et al., 2023). Given the focus of WIOA on earlier interventions with transition-age youth, there is also a need to articulate to businesses the strengths and needs of engaging younger potential employees. Although still ongoing, further collaborative efforts should be sensitive to the concerns of educators in mediating work-based learning experiences for students (Carter et al., 2021). Similarly, more comprehensive partnerships with inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs) are needed based on data showing that VR agencies are not consistently reaching target populations for counseling in postsecondary education. VR must continue to cultivate these relationships with institutes of higher education in keeping with this growth of IPSEs and their significance as an increasingly viable pathway to CIE. Although coordination has increased as a result of WIOA overall, there is also a comprehensive need for more clarity in roles and responsibilities of various

partners as well as agreements over data sharing (GAO, 2018).

Collaboration is a crucial aspect to successful Pre-ETS implementation over time. To better support school-VR collaboration, it is important for teams to set up periodic times during the year to meet and review the Pre-ETS process. One specific strategy to enhance collaboration and delivery of Pre-ETS is to facilitate an annual joint planning between schools and VR agencies before the commencement of the school year. This meeting should include a thorough review of roles and responsibilities, identification of logistical strengths and needs, and targeted training on specific aspects of Pre-ETS, such as how to communicate key aspects of Pre-ETS to families. Following this, the team should meet regularly during the school year to monitor progress of student Pre-ETS applications, provision of specific Pre-ETS, student career goals and skill acquisition, and referrals for individualized VR services.

Using information from these planning sessions, special educators and VR counselors can identify innovative approaches to enhancing Pre-ETS delivery. For instance, data may indicate that a high school has a robust career and technical education program and a district-wide summer internship program that have been effective in providing students with disabilities with multiple opportunities for individualized work experiences, but that students have not received systematic instruction in workplace readiness skills or options for postsecondary education. The collaborative school and VR team in this scenario may decide to have a Pre-ETS provider give a series of "preparing for work" workshops to 9th and 10th grade students that focus on interviewing, gathering needed documents for employment, completing applications, and professional work behaviors. They may also meet in small groups with 11th and 12 grade students with disabilities to discuss the college selection process, applying to colleges, and navigating federal student aid options. The team could also decide that the school will continue to take the lead on work-based learning experiences, but that VR will support the experiences by providing job coaches for students with more significant support needs. Over time, the team might develop a scope and sequence plan for Pre-ETS, based on student and school needs, that identifies how the school and VR could provide a comprehensive range of services to students over the course of their high school careers that complements the transition services the school is already offering. In addition to systematic plan-ning and implementation of Pre-ETS, state and local leaders need to identify ways to address two critical barriers to Pre-ETS delivery - lack of providers and challenges in sharing data across agencies. To do this, leaders may want to seek out non-traditional VR service providers, such as school districts, workforce development agencies, rural extension offices, and local non-profit organizations, who may be willing to become VR vendors and offer Pre-ETS. Determining ways to share student and programming data to facilitate Pre-ETS referrals, plan development, and student progress monitoring is also desperately needed. This could be done by adding Pre-ETS reporting elements to student IEP transition plans or using shared online platforms to document student plans and progress.

7.2. Rethinking professional development and training

There remains a high degree of uncertainty on how Pre-ETS providers are trained in working with transition age youth in general or Pre-ETS efficacy in particular, but indications are that staff are unprepared for delivering Pre-ETS (Oertle et al., 2017). Thus, there is a great need to emphasize training aligned with evidence-based approaches to promoting CIE for youth with disabilities (Whittenburg et al., 2023). Tansey et al. (2023) found that training focused on youth in foster care, rural residents, youth with disabilities, and Black and Latino communities were ranked as most prominent training needs by VR professionals. Ongoing technical assistance efforts provided to state VR agencies such as those provided by VRTAC-QE and NTACT-C projects hold significant promise in supporting states' efforts to design, evaluate, and sustain effective models to serve potentially eligible youth in their states. Given staff shortages, VR agency leadership has indicated that on-demand training is a priority (including resources that could be shared with employers) but currently lack resources to fulfill these training needs (GAO, 2018). It should be acknowledged that training efforts can only be marginally successful if they do not aid in retaining personnel receiving that training. To that extent, further research and state-specific needs analysis is required to better align training efforts with stemming the significant turnover among VR agency staff.

7.3. Building and proliferating models of success

Recent studies have pointed to a need for further and more consistent incorporation of

research-validated practices and approaches in the implementation of Pre-ETS (e.g., Whittenburg et al., 2023). Additionally, to fully capitalize on the intent of the five distinctive Pre-ETS components of WIOA, models are needed that provide a more systematic scope and sequence of services to move younger students from career exploration and work readiness activities to work experiences prior to graduation. Although work-based learning is the most strongly supported evidence-based practice among Pre-ETS, it is not only the least provided to potentially eligible youth, it has also been identified as the area most in need of training for VR staff (Tansey et al., 2023). In order for Pre-ETS to be successful, the emphasis simply must shift to ensuring that more students have work experiences. Finally, in order to better determine effective models, we need empirical research investigating whether Pre-ETS services provided by VR counselors directly is more effective than those provided by vendor providers, both as a whole and within each of the five required Pre-ETS.

8. Conclusion

Pre-ETS represents one of the most innovative and ambitious policy changes in transition and employment policy since the initial passage of the Rehabilitation Act. However, with the ambitiousness of the policy has come multiple challenges faced by VR and other practitioners in making it work. Collaboration lies at the heart of these challenges, but also presents the greatest potential for change. In moving into a second decade of WIOA, VR 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.

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