

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only about 17% of persons with a disability are employed. This national problem is now being reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities to study and prepare findings, conclusions and recommendations for Congress. This author's recommendation on increasing employment of persons with disabilities is that the "Certificate of Completion" used throughout our nation's high schools be abandoned or disallowed, and that instead districts offer an "Occupational" or "Vocational" certificate that certifies that the student has learned certain employment skills. This approach would require that high schools focus on the building of specific work related skills during high school, enable the educational teams to create more measurable transition goals because specific skills would have to be identified for particular occupational certificates, and require more accountability in terms of identifying the student's inventory of skills and preferred areas of work. (It may be that the IDEA needs to be amended as well to reflect such a change).

Very often students with disabilities are provided with a "certificate of completion" instead of a high school diploma but such a certificate provides little support to help a student with a disability obtain post-secondary employment. A "certificate of completion" provides little "resume fodder" or insight into what the student is actually capable of in terms of workability or what they have learned while attending their high school transition program. A "Certificate of Completion" indicates that the student did not meet the rigors required to earn a high school diploma, and it fails to demonstrate that the student has learned any particular expertise to qualify him or her for employment.

Workability in California: In 1981, the California Department of Education completed a two-year study that showed that special education students were not being adequately prepared for the labor market. In response, California adopted the "Workability" program to increase the employment of students with special needs. The Workability program was expanded over a decade to include four "Workability" tiers designed to apply to different stages of a student's life (e.g. in school students, out-of-school students, community college students and university students) and which should provide up to 100 hours of training for students to learn job-related skills.

Students with disabilities in California are supposed to be provided with employment training while in high school under the California "Workability I" program. WorkAbility is a school-to-work program that is supposed to provide comprehensive pre-employment training, employment placement and follow-up for middle and high school students in special education who are making a post-secondary transition from school to work. Given that students are already supposed to be getting workability support at school, requiring more targeted skills so that students can earn "occupational certificates" as an option would help students and their teams devise "tracks" that the students could pursue, make sure they identify specific skills and deficits, and help them empower the students to become vested decision makers in their future.

An example of how this might work: Johnny is cognitively impaired and not sure what he wants to do after high school and does not really know what he can do. What the team knows is that in Johnny's spare time, he loves shopping and going to malls and talking to people in stores. He is able to walk to a local store on his own and present currency to buy items using the dollar up strategy. He especially likes going to the local train hobby store. In this instance, a "retail occupational certificate" may be of value. The team would then create a retail skills checklist that is based on Johnny's individual skills and needs. Sample items on the retail certificate might be: learning how to greet customers, what to do if a customer had a question or problem (e.g. go get the manager or another sales associate), how to use a cash register, how to retrieve stock when a customer asks for something, how to store inventory, how to retrieve inventory, and similar retail items. In some instances, assistive technology may be needed to read items or remind the student to do things but at least the student is working on specific skills needed for a specific field.

Once Johnny is able to do all the items independently (or whatever the goal for him is based upon his individual needs), he then will have a certificate that demonstrates what he can do so that when he applies for a job and presents his occupational certificate, the potential employer will be informed of Johnny's individual skill set or area of expertise. Depending on the student's abilities, there may be a need for a Retail Occupational Certificate Level 1, 2 or 3 that the student can continue to build upon through adult transition programs after leaving high school.

The existing statistics by the department of labor demonstrate that the existing approaches and tools are not working to help our population with disabilities as much as is needed. Requiring districts to use "Occupational Certificates" instead of "Certificates of Completion" will help students and their educational teams create meaningful direction, require the identification of more specific skill sets for workability and provide valuable foundations upon which the students can begin their post-secondary lives.