



# **Project Access Implementation Guidelines**

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## Why School/Vocational Rehabilitation Partnerships are Essential

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***On average, working-age people with disabilities have a lower level of educational attainment, are poorer and far less likely to be employed than adults without disabilities.***

The transition from youth to adulthood is challenging for almost every young person. This is particularly true for young people with disabilities. Yet, it is in those critical transition-age years that a young person's future can be determined. Part of a successful future includes finding and keeping work.

Research has identified educational and career development interventions that can make a positive difference in the lives of youth. Work-based learning experiences, preferably connected to curriculum content; student-centered individualized education programs that drive instruction; family involvement in and support of education and career development activities; and linkages to individually determined support services have all been proven, by both practice and research, to lead to the education and employment success of all youth, including youth with disabilities.

### **All youth need the following:**

- Access to high quality standards-based education regardless of the setting
- Information about career options and exposure to the world of work, including structured internships
- Opportunities to develop social, civic, and leadership skills
- Strong connections to caring adults
- Access to safe places to interact with their peers
- Support services to allow them to become independent adults.

### **Youth with disabilities need to do the following in transition:**

- Use their individual transition plans to drive their personal instruction, and use strategies to continue the transition process post-schooling
- Develop functional skills that enable them to pursue post secondary education and careers. These skills include self advocacy, social skills, academic, and problem solving skills.
- Develop knowledge of reasonable accommodations that they can request and control in educational, community, and employment settings.
- Be supported by highly qualified transitional support staff
- Develop and use individual transition plans that drive their long and short term goals

## What is the Purpose for These Guidelines?

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The guidelines presented in this manual are intended to promote the coordinated delivery of transition services by Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and public schools. VR helps people with disabilities prepare for, obtain, maintain and/or regain suitable employment. The concept of cooperation and collaboration is embodied in two pieces of Federal legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998. This manual aims to identify recommendations and best practices to foster interagency collaboration between public schools and Vocational Rehabilitation in Oregon.

## Overview of Access

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Project Access is a model for integrating VR counselors into Oregon schools. The goal of Access is to facilitate positive long-term outcomes among all students with disabilities by bringing together vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC's) and school personnel. Through these collaborations, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors promote an awareness of VR services and provide VR services and supports to students with disabilities in the context of schools. These services and supports are provided to youth beginning in 9th grade, continue through high school, and provide VR follow-up beyond High school. Working with teachers and other school personnel, VRC's provide an array of supports including:

- Individualized transition-focused assessments and planning (e.g., career assessments and goal setting)
- Career development supports and skills building including goal career exploration, job search skills, self-advocacy skills, self-determination skills, social skills, and independent living skills
- Supports for family involvement in the transition process,
- Eligibility determination for VR Services, including the development of employment plans and goals, and individualized supports to achieve employment or postsecondary education.

**To learn more about Access visit the project website at [projectAccess.uoregon.edu](http://projectAccess.uoregon.edu)**

## Implementing Access

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VR Counselors working with schools as part of Access need help to become integrated into the school culture. With the help of school staff, VR counselors can achieve this by:

- Providing VR brochures and business cards to the school
- Vocational Rehabilitation should establish a consistent point of contact with a designee from the local school(s)(e.g. Transition Specialist, teacher, administrator, school counselor) to assist with learning about the school, school staff and students.
- Having regularly scheduled school visits
- Participating in transition and job fairs at the school
- Attending school IEP meetings when invited
- Making VR information available to students and parents
- Being available for Registration Day with information on VR

### **Vocational Rehabilitation Activities:**

In order to support and facilitate the VR/School partnership, VR needs to work closely with schools. There are a number of specific activities that are necessary in order to provide appropriate services to students. These include:

- Meet with the school designee at the beginning of the school year to review referral procedures and to identify transitioning students who may benefit from VR services. There should be sufficient time for the VR Counselor to assist the student in identifying his/her vocational goal and needs so that the IPE can be finalized prior the youth exiting school district services (graduates with a regular diploma or completes the year in which they turn 21)
- Visit the assigned school(s) at least once a month, starting in the fall of the school year (these meetings should be set at the beginning of the school year)
- Visit more frequently depending on the needs of the school and the local agreement with the VR field office
- Maintain regular communication
- Ensure VR information reaches all students with disabilities who have barriers to employment.
- Vocational Rehabilitation should establish a consistent point of contact with a designee from the local school(s) to assist with learning about the school, school staff and students.
- Assist secondary students with disabilities in transitioning from school into employment, postsecondary education, or training
- Complete VR eligibility determinations, Individual Plan for Employment development, and payment of any necessary VR services from application to case closure
- Complete an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) prior to the youth's exit from school district services (defined as completion of a regular diploma or the year in which the student turns 21).

## **School Activities:**

In order to support and facilitate the VR/School partnership, schools need to work closely with VR. There are a number of specific activities that are necessary in order to provide appropriate services to students. These include:

- Identification of at least one school designee to work closely and maintain consistent communication with VR
- Provide space for the VR counselor and information on students
- Invite VR counselors to appropriate school wide events.
- Meet with Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at the beginning of the school year to review referral procedures and to identify transitioning students who may benefit from VR services. There should be sufficient time for the VR Counselor to assist the student in identifying his/her vocational goal and needs so that the IPE can be finalized prior the youth exiting school district services (graduates with a regular diploma or completes the year in which they turn 21)
- Prepare for VR visits to the assigned school(s) at least once a month, starting in the fall of the school year (these meeting should be set at the beginning of the school year)
- Visit more frequently depending on the needs of the school and the local agreement with the VR field office
- Maintain regular communication
- Seek out and make school referrals of students with disabilities who have barriers to employment.
- Assist VR with needed documentation
- With advanced notice, provide invitations to VR to attend appropriate IEP meetings
- Provide opportunities for VR to educate staff and students in group settings
- Provide a signed Release of Information to obtain information documents from Vocation Rehabilitation to enable them to provide information regarding VR services to students and their families.

## **Services provided in Partnership by VR and Schools:**

### **Outreach Services (to all youth with disabilities/504 Plan)**

- Consult with and educate schools, parents, students, and other agencies about VR services
- Conduct outreach to include VR orientation presentations, dissemination of Access and VR brochures, and technical assistance with transition IEP planning
- Participate in transition fairs, job fairs, and other activities targeting parents and students to increase appropriate referrals
- Conduct preliminary assessment interviews
- Present VR information in the classroom
- Providing guidance about informed choice, disability issues, and employment

### **Targeted Services (to youth identified as potential VR applicants)**

- Conduct early identification and assessment of student needs for transition services
- Participate in IEP meetings at the invitation of the school (It is recommended that VR participate in the Transition IEP meeting when a student is 15 years old unless the student is at risk of dropping out of school, in which case it would be earlier)

*Best Practice:*

- Participate in other ways to assist the IEP team in planning transition services
- Link the student with other appropriate adult agencies that may provide services during the transition process and/or after the student exits school
- Encourage student's application for VR transition services when appropriate
- Communicate relevant VR policy which may impact a student's application or eligibility for VR services during the IEP process when they participate and are supported by parents or other persons necessary for their lives. This could be

**Application/Eligibility Services**

- Coordinate and provide payment for assessments necessary for VR services that are not available from the school records
- Counsel student, parent and/or guardian discussing vocational goals, recommendations, and discuss options for VR services. Encourage career exploration, community based work experience, mentoring, job shadowing and volunteering
- Provide guidance and counseling about work attitudes, habits, and behaviors generally required by employers. (Counseling may encompass regular attendance, punctuality, orderliness, grooming/hygiene, diligence, acceptance of authority, and conformance to established rules and procedures, including the use of community rehabilitation facilities and work experience placements at community work sites.)
- Provide guidance and counseling about postsecondary training and education
- Develop Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) which is coordinated with the school Individual Educational Plan (IEP)
- Coordinate comparable services and provide VR services outlined in the IPE that are vocationally relevant and necessary to obtain employment. VR services are only provided when there are no comparable benefits available for community based work experience and/or postsecondary employment services

**Student and Parent Activities:**

In order for a student's transition to be successful, both the students and parents need to participate in the process. There are a number of specific activities that are necessary in order for the transition to move forward and be successful for the student. These include:

- Work with special education teacher and/or transition specialist to help determine reasonable vocational goals or areas of interest.
- Gain knowledge and experience about identified areas of interest by volunteering, searching internet, job shadowing, etc.
- Participate in IEP meetings as they include important transition/post-school goal setting.
- Learn more about the VR process and visit with a VR counselor in your school/area.
- Apply for VR Services by completing a VR Application form and providing all necessary documentation (which will be explained by VR Counselor).
- Meet with VR counselor to determine an IPE goal area and outline the Plan for Employment.

## Vocational Rehabilitation Process

Vocational Rehabilitation counselors work with individuals with disabilities who have barriers to getting or maintaining employment. They assist individuals in getting and keeping a job that matches their skills, interests and abilities. VR staff works in partnership with the community and businesses to develop employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Below is a brief overview of the VR process from application to employment.

1. *Application*: The first step in the VR process is the submission of a VR application. Depending on the age of the student, parent signature and other information may be required.

2. *Determine Eligibility*: After the application is signed, eligibility is determined within 60 days. To make this determination, the VR counselor must document (1) the presence of a disability, and (2) functional limitations or barriers that impede successful employment. When determining eligibility, the VR counselor may need school records, medical records, psychological records, SSI records, and/or any other records that document the presence of a disability, and/or how the disability impedes employment-related activities.

3. *Develop Employment Goal and Plan*: Once eligibility is determined, an employment goal is developed with each client taking into consideration the individual's interests, skills, and job market conditions. This goal forms the foundation of the individualized employment plan (IPE) which identifies the specific steps, services, supports, and activities needed to achieve employment.

4. *Develop Employment Goal and Plan*: VR counselors assist individuals in implementing their IPE's. Examples of the types of services that may be provided include:

- Evaluation
- Counseling and guidance,
- Employment services
- On the Job Training (OJT)
- Apprenticeships
- Nonpaid work experiences
- Post-secondary training at colleges, vocational, technical, or business schools.

5. *Attain Employment*: The final step in the process is employment. Once employment has been achieved, a 90-day follow-up is conducted to ensure that employment is stable. If individuals experience disability-related problems on the job, they can contact VR for post-employment services.

### Confidentiality

VR Counselors are bound by Oregon Statutes (CRC Code of Ethics, OAR's) which

address the release of applicant and consumer records as well as confidential and privileged information. Parental involvement and other natural supports are critical to ensure a successful transition to employment, especially if the student is dependent upon them for assistance.

### **Permission to Share Information**

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. FERPA gives parents certain rights with respect to their children's education records. A school district may not release information about a student, or information obtained from education records, without the written consent of the parent or eligible student. These rights transfer to the student when he or she reaches the age of 18 or attends a school beyond the high school level. For purposes of Accessing Special Education records for students who are still in high school, the rights remain with the parents until the student is 21. If you are working with high school students between the ages of 18 and 21, you may want to obtain written permission from both the student and the parent.

### **Referral to VR**

Typically, a referral packet to VR will include:

- A completed "referral to VR form"
- The 504 plan, if applicable
- The most recent IEP
- Psychological, medical and specialty evaluations such as adaptive behavior, mobility, speech and language, hearing, vision, etc.
- Vocational assessment results, including functional vocational evaluation
- Information regarding an individual's prevocational and vocational activities through the school, including community experiences and school-to-career activities
- School transcripts, if appropriate
- Other available assessments, plans or information deemed appropriate

If the VR counselor is able to find sufficient documentation of impairment and functional limitations, eligibility for VR services will be determined, the Order of Selection prioritization category will be identified and, if appropriate, an Individualized Plan for Employment can be developed for a student. In this way, the plan can be developed before a student exits the secondary education system, and services can begin without unnecessary delay caused by the need for additional testing.

### **Eligibility Determination**

- The individual has a documented physical or mental impairment; and
- The impairment constitutes, or results in, at least one substantial impediment to employment which is consistent with his or her abilities and capabilities; and
- The individual can benefit in terms of an employment outcome from the provision of vocational rehabilitation services; and
- The individual needs substantial vocational rehabilitation services to prepare for, secure, retain or regain employment which is consistent with strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities and informed choice.

***In other words, a person must have a disability that interferes with the ability to work and must need vocational rehabilitation services to obtain or maintain employment to be determined eligible.***

A person is presumed able to become employed *unless* VR has clear and convincing evidence that the person cannot benefit from VR services. As defined under the Rehabilitation Act Amendments, transition services are provided to eligible students with disabilities who request or show interest in a desire for employment and who can benefit from these services. This includes students with disabilities within the special education system and/or the general education system, regardless of the disability label or type of educational services the student has been receiving.

### **Useful Information for VR Eligibility Determination**

VR should work with school staff to ensure referrals of students with disabilities to the VR program beginning at the beginning of the school year as follows:

- The school staff should prepare students for referral
- Referral and application for VR services is recommended at age **15** for students attending schools who are or plan to be involved in community based work experiences
- All other students are encouraged to apply for VR transition services **two** years prior to the youth exiting school district services (graduates with a regular diploma or completes the year in which they turn 21).
- Students at high risk of dropping out should be referred if they are old enough to begin training or searching for employment
- The VR Counselor may act in an advisory capacity for at risk youth that are too young to apply

The process for eligibility determination is greatly facilitated when the VR counselor is able to obtain documentation of a student's impairments and functional capacities from a school practitioner. A written evaluation that describes adaptive behavior (how a person interacts with his/her environment), and functional assessment (how the disability may impact the person in vocational settings) is critical. **For eligibility determination purposes, VR needs to obtain a clear description of functional capacities and limitations.** The ideal description of functional assessment reflects classroom, home and social environments and includes:

- A written picture of how an individual interacts with his or her environment.
- A statement describing how the student functions in educational settings.
- Sufficient information for VR counselors to understand the impact of the impairment in vocational settings.

This information will be used by the VR counselor to determine eligibility for VR services as well as to determine Order of Selection priority classification. The utilization of existing assessment information may reduce the need for unnecessary additional testing of students and streamline the process of eligibility determination. School practitioners know their students well and can provide valuable information about the individual strengths and limitations of each student that will become part of a disability diagnosis.

*Best Practice:* Even though the minor's signature is not required, the student should be encouraged to review and sign VR forms along with his/her parent or guardian. This will help to better prepare him/her for their transition from school to work.

A comprehensive assessment incorporates an evaluation of psychological, social, educational, physical/medical, and vocational functioning. Those who can provide an accurate description of a student's functional capacities may include trans-disciplinary team members, such as school psychologists, social workers, classroom teachers, related services providers, or other school personnel who have direct involvement with the student. The information provided by the school Psychologist will be used by the VR counselor to document a disability diagnosis and determine how functional limitations result in a substantial impediment to employment. It is important to note that Federal law requires that diagnostic assessments used to determine VR eligibility must have been completed, or reviewed and approved, by individuals who are licensed and certified for that purpose. In general, the more current the evaluation and supporting documentation (e.g., historical data, previous assessment results, medical diagnosis) the better. **For rehabilitation purposes, "currency" is viewed as an accurate reflection of how an individual functions today.** For example, if it is anticipated that the cognitive functioning of an individual tested several years ago would result in the same level if tested today, a statement from the school psychologist verifying previous documentation may be sufficient for eligibility purposes and can expedite the utilization of this information.

Throughout the years that a student is involved with the education system, efforts are made to focus on and build upon the strengths of the individual rather than the disability. In order for an adult agency, such as VR, to determine that an individual is eligible for services, a case must be made that the person has disabilities that cause significant limitations in their everyday functioning. Once eligibility has been determined, the focus of planning and program development can focus on the strengths of the individual as well as the disability.

### **Obtaining Signatures on VR Forms**

Parents of minor aged students and legal guardians must be involved in the VR process and sign VR forms. If the student is of majority age (18 years old) and without an assigned legal guardian, only the student will be required to sign forms.

The VR Counselor needs to make sure that the student or student's representative provides copies of the court order or other paperwork necessary to establish the legal rights of the guardian.



### **Eligibility for VR Transition Services**

VR eligibility criteria are the same for students as for other adult consumers applying for VR services.

**Use of existing information:** School documents/applicant and family information should be used whenever possible to ensure that VR eligibility determination is made in 60 days of application or earlier. VR policy stresses the importance of using existing information to the maximum extent appropriate. **Social Security Beneficiaries** are presumed eligible.

**Out of state records:** Records originating from outside of Oregon may be used to the extent that they meet the state of Oregon and the Operational Policies and Procedures for VR Counselors requirements for medical and psychological information.

**Mental health diagnosis:** The diagnosis of a mental health disorder is acceptable from a licensed psychiatrist, or a licensed clinical psychologist. A licensed school psychologist may be used for all developmental diagnoses. The required diagnosis should follow the coding established in the most current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM.IV).

**Mental Retardation:** The term “Intellectual Disability” is used by the Department of Education to describe mental retardation. However, VR uses the diagnosis term or mental retardation found in the DSM. While a person’s IQ may be a good indicator, adaptive functioning deficits are necessary for a consumer to be diagnosed with mental retardation.

**Specific Learning Disabilities:** Reports generated by schools in Oregon, which document a Specific Learning Disability diagnosis, are VR acceptable documentation for transition students applying for VR services, though the report must still meet VR timeline requirements and be based on age appropriate assessments.

**Best Practice:** When a student with a disability is referred to VR from the school system, it is a good practice to receive a signed copy of the school's release of information form with the school records. The VR Counselor will notify School District liaisons of changes in VR policy or procedure that may affect the transition process.

Communication with referral sources and others directly involved with the transition student is essential for establishing positive working relationships, appropriate referrals, and successful employment outcomes.

At age **15**, agencies that may be able to provide or pay for the transition student's needs after exiting school should be invited to attend the student's IEP meeting. At times, the VR Counselor or Human Resource Assistant may not be able to attend IEP meetings when invited. When this occurs, alternative methods of networking with the referral source and the student may be employed. This will ensure that students with disabilities are provided with information about VR transition services and are given an opportunity to apply at least two years before the student exits school.

Alternatives to physical attendance include:

- Telephone contact
- Conference calls
- E-mail
- Completion of a written input form for school use in documenting agency participation

School follow-up is necessary for effective IEP implementation. Schools usually designate a staff person as a Transition IEP Coordinator. This person is responsible for communicating the student's transition services needs to agency representatives who were unable to attend.

The school must obtain agency commitments to provide or pay for needed transition services or reconvene the IEP team to determine alternate methods for meeting the student's needs. It is important for the VR Counselor to respond to school staff on the progress of mutual students, with appropriate parental, legal guardian or student consent at age 18.

## Overview of YTP (Oregon Youth Transition Program)

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YTP is a comprehensive transition program for youth with disabilities operated collaboratively by Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), the University of Oregon (U of O), and local school districts statewide in Oregon. The purpose of the program is to prepare youth with disabilities for employment or career related post-secondary education or training.

YTP serves youth with disabilities who need additional support, beyond the services typically offered through the general or special education program, to achieve their secondary and post-secondary employment and continuing education goals. YTP youth are representative of all youth with disabilities nationally with respect to gender and primary disability categories; however, the majority of youth in the program experience a number of additional individual, family, or school system barriers such as poor academic skills, limited social and independent living skills, negative job experiences, and low levels of family involvement or support. Over 50% of youth currently served through the YTP live in low income families.

The YTP provides services to youth beginning during the last two years of high school and continuing on after the youth exits school district services (graduates with a regular diploma or completes the year in which they turn 21). All students in the program receive a comprehensive pattern of service designed to address a broad array of transition needs. These services are delivered by Transition Specialists (school-based service providers) and VRC's and include:

- Individualized planning, focused on post school goals and self-determination, and help to coordinate school plans with relevant community agencies
- Instruction in academic, vocational, independent living, and personal social skills, and help to stay in and complete high school
- Career development services including goal setting, career exploration, job search skills, and self-advocacy.
- Emphasis on paid employment such as connections with local employers, development of school-based business, on the job assessment and training
- Support services such as individualized mentoring and referrals for additional interventions
- Follow-up support for one year after leaving the program to assist in maintaining positive outcomes in employment or post-secondary settings

**To learn more about YTP go to project website at <http://ytporegon.edu>**