

# Evaluation of the Coordination and Delivery of Pre-Employment Transition Services in Washington State



## FINAL REPORT

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***Working to improve coordination between schools and Vocational Rehabilitation to increase transition services and outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities***



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT .....	1
EVALUATION PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW .....	1
Historical Context: WIOA is the Common Round .....	1
Continuum of Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Youth and Students with Disabilities .....	5
Washington: Implementation of the Continuum of VR Services for Youth and Students .....	9
National Models of Coordinated Transition Service Delivery.....	14
Washington Transition Program (WTP): A Model Demonstration Project.....	18
Need for Evaluation to Inform the Implementation of the Washington Transition Program.....	27
Guiding Evaluation Questions .....	28
METHODS.....	29
Overview of Methods.....	29
Conceptual Framework .....	29
Recruitment .....	30
Participants .....	32
Procedures.....	33
Data Analysis .....	34
Trustworthiness of Results .....	35
RESULTS.....	35
What’s happening now .....	36
Strengths and strategies .....	44
Barriers.....	49
Values and Beliefs.....	59
Recommendations for the Future.....	61
DISCUSSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS.....	68
Summary and Broad Findings.....	69
Connecting the Results to the Literature .....	71
Limitations.....	75
Recommendations for Practice.....	76
Conclusion.....	78
REFERENCES.....	79
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS .....	84

## **ABSTRACT**

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This evaluation builds off of and extends prior work in Washington to document, understand, and inform the ways that local schools and Vocational Rehabilitation agencies work to deliver a set of coordinated services for youth and young adults with disabilities. A set of seven guiding questions were developed to explore the experiences, needs, barriers, strategies, and recommendations of educators, VR staff, and contractors engaged in the coordinated delivery of Vocational Rehabilitation transition services. The answers to these questions were intended to inform the development and implementation of the Washington Transition Program.

Evaluators utilized qualitative methods and held focus groups and interviews with 25 educators, DVR Regional Transition Consultants, DVR High School Counselor Liaisons, and DVR Contractors. The data were analyzed using an inductive approach, and five themes emerged: (1) What's happening now; (2) Strengths and strategies; (3) Barriers; (4) Values and beliefs; and (5) Recommendations for the future.

The evaluation resulted in the following recommendations for policy and practice:

- Increase the accessibility and coordination of services
- Develop common knowledge
- Take action and be engaged
- Provide additional leadership and guidance
- Highlight flexibility and innovation
- Focus on consistency and follow through
- Be relationship forward
- Start small, dream big

The findings from this study have been used to inform a revised version of the Washington Transition Program, which now includes more emphasis on building knowledge and collaboration across stakeholders and establishing concrete strategies to support the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services. The results of our current evaluation project also align with and extend many of the findings from the current body of literature exploring the impact of WIOA on the continuum of VR services for youth and young adults with disabilities.

## **EVALUATION PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW**

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Research and evaluation have consistently shown that individuals with disabilities experience poorer occupational and employment outcomes than individuals without disabilities. For decades the U.S. has been aware of these discrepancies and has worked to address them by prohibiting workplace discrimination based upon disability, and facilitating access to vocational services through laws, policies, and programs. Despite these efforts, postsecondary employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities continue to fall behind their peers without disabilities.

This report begins with a discussion of historical contexts and the continuum of transition services and pre-employment transition services that are available for youth with disabilities from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). This information is used to provide the reader with essential background information about the unique and complicated contexts of this topic, and to communicate the way that we interpretate these contexts in our work. The report then briefly describes some of the key steps that Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (WA-DVR) has taken to implement this continuum of transition services (with an emphasis on pre-employment transition services), followed by a brief summary of what we know as a field about collaborative transition service delivery models. The overview and purpose conclude with a description of the research informed model demonstration project that will be implemented in 2021/2022 (the Washington Transition Program; WTP), a need for feedback and input from WTP stakeholders to better inform the implementation of such a model, and proposed methods for collecting, analyzing, and reporting this information. The report then describes the implementation of these methods, the findings, and a discussion section that includes limitations and recommendations.

### **Historical Context: WIOA is the Common Round**

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 expressly prohibits discrimination based upon disability for any program or activity that receives federal assistance and requires state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies coordinate with education agencies to facilitate the transition from in-school services to post-school services for eligible individuals with disabilities. Today, the rules and regulations that are laid out by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act of 2014 (WIOA, 2014), describe the purpose and policies of state VR agencies, including what services can and should be provided to youth and

students with disabilities. Separately, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA, 1990) established a clear focus on postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities and the most current authorization of this law (e.g., IDEA, 2004) requires public schools to ensure all students with a disability have a “transition plan” as a part of their individualized education program (IEP) in the school year that they turn 16. As a part of IDEA, schools are encouraged to partner with related service providers (such as VR agencies, when appropriate) to support students in meeting their transition goals (IDEA, 2014). The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA, 1998) developed a comprehensive workforce investment system aimed at improving the quality of the nation’s workforce, reducing welfare dependency, and enhancing the productivity and global competitiveness of the nation. The WIA was replaced by WIOA of 2014 and reinforced the previous acts goals of increasing the prosperity of the U.S. workforce, economic growth, and global competitiveness, but also amended three other acts including the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998, the Wagner-Peyser Act of 1963, and Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 made by WIOA of 2014 were considerably expansive and included a requirement that state VR agencies reserve at least 15% of their federal program funds to ensure the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with a disability who need them. These amendments are considerably expansive because the definition of potentially eligible students with disabilities is far broader than the population of individuals with significant disabilities that VR has historically advocated to serve (The Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2020) and now includes the required coordination of services to more than 2 million additional students in the country who are in high school and eligible for and receiving special education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020).

This is not the only time in history that such an unprecedented expansion had been made to the Rehabilitation Act. According to the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities module focused on the History of Vocational Rehabilitation (The Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2020), State VR agencies were formed in 1920 after the Soldier Rehabilitation Act of 1918 introduced a modern and successful re-training program for physically wounded veterans from World War I who were not able to go back to their old jobs. The innovative approach involved time limited financial supports accompanied by job training and preparation for new jobs that would meet new abilities. In 1920 the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act of 1918 was amended to start VR programs as we know them today by creating the Rehabilitation Service Administration and expanding services to include individuals with physical disabilities. For the next several decades,

services were limited to only individuals with physical disabilities who could return to work based upon the re-training services that could be provided by the VR programs. That was, until the Rehabilitation Act of 1943, when the eligibility criteria for services was expanded to include individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those living with mental illness. Through the 1960's VR programs were very successful and were one of the only government programs in history that has yielded a financially positive return on investment (for every dollar that was spent on training, recipients paid back 7 dollars in state and federal taxes). Building from its success the act was amended again in 1965, and VR services were unprecedentedly expanded by nearly 10,000%; providing services generally to almost anyone who was not able to find a job on their own. This expansion overwhelmed the VR system, reduced the individualization and quality of services that could be provided, and individuals with the most significant disabilities were no longer receiving the quality of services that they once were and needed to enter the workforce. Through disability advocacy of the 60's and early 70's, and waning success in VR outcomes, the Rehabilitation Act was once again amended in 1973 to reduce the scope of who could receive services from VR and focus primarily on people with significant physical or cognitive disabilities who could successfully return to work if provided the services offered by VR (The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2020).

This focus on people with significant disabilities remained constant up until the most recent, and considerably expansive amendments of WIOA in 2014, which again expanded the population of individual's who would be eligible to receive services delivered by VR (pre-employment transition services to potentially eligible students with disabilities; considerably expansive as described above). These historical contexts are important to understand, particularly as it relates to the widespread challenges in the implementation of WIOA which has similar undertones as the radical and shifting changes to the Rehabilitation Act between 1965 and 1973 (Shultz, 2020). Knowing that VR has historical experience in resisting substantial changes may help to contextualize some of the current challenges in shifting cultures and providing services that are currently being experienced across the nation, and may possibly foreshadow future policy changes that could reduce the overall burden on VR agencies to ensure the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities.

In a 2020 address by Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Commissioner March Shultz, to the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), it was reported that the WIOA (2014) has contributed to current resource shortages that have led to a 40% reduction in the nationwide number of VR clients

that are being determined eligible and a reduction in the percentage of those that are exiting VR with an employment outcome (57% in 2016 vs 45% in 2019; Shultz, 2020). RSA Commissioner Shultz, also reported that the number of students who are receiving pre-employment services has increased by 40% between program year 2018 and 2019, going from serving 179,000 students in 2017/18 to 248,00 students in 2018/19. Additionally, during that same period, the number of potentially eligible students who received services increased by 60% from 85,00 in program year 2018 to 137,000 in program year 2019; and the number of pre-employment transition services that were provided in 2017 ( $n = 747,000$ ), almost doubled to 1,300,000 in 2019 (Shultz, 2020). Moreover, the set-aside requirements associated with pre-employment transition services have reduced available funds for State VR programs and caused more than half of these programs to be in Order of Selections, and \$300 million federal dollars were returned because they were unable to be matched, or utilized for the VR program (Shultz, 2020).

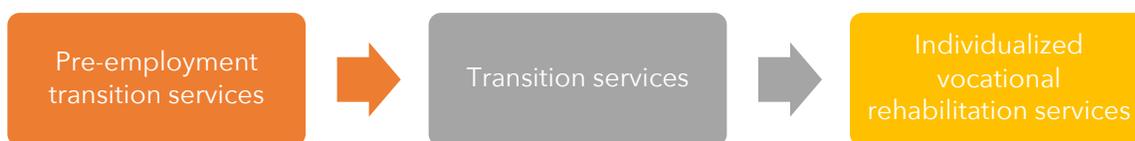
It is important to note that VR programs are experiencing these challenges despite providing services to substantially fewer potentially eligible students with disabilities than there are estimated to be within the country - 137,000 students received pre-employment transition services in 2019 compared to the national estimates of 2 million students in high school who are eligible for and receiving special education (Hussar, et al. 2020; Shultz, 2020). As additional evidence to support these struggles, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the state of pre-employment transition services released in 2018 reported that 37 of the 74 state VR agencies that responded to their survey expressed challenges in identifying and reaching the population of students eligible to receive services, that 74 state agencies aggregately expended more than \$100 million less than their targets in fiscal year 2016 (\$465 million), and that more than half (32 of 74) reported that they did not spend the minimum required 15 percent of federal VR grant funds to provide pre-employment transition services (GAO, 2018). Interviews with state VR and educational administrators in three states reported barriers related to meeting the spending requirements, as these funds cannot be used to support administrative costs, and that the majority of services typically provided to students with disabilities prior to WIOA did not fall into one of the five pre-employment transition services categories (e.g., transportation, tuition, job coaching; GAO, 2018). A larger number of students would need to be reached to expend the full 15% (GAO, 2018). Additional barriers to delivering services included coordinating service delivery with state educational agencies (e.g., determining responsibilities, obtaining data to determine need), balancing pre-employment transition services with more traditional VR services,

collecting the detailed information required for the documentation of services, and updating data tracking systems (GAO, 2018).

All of that said, under WIOA state VR agencies are still required to ensure the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities; and, must work to either improve these systems or continue to return the federal monies that are set aside to do so. It is perhaps an important reminder that research suggests collaborative transition service delivery models, wherein VR delivers services in coordination and collaboration with local schools, have been shown to significantly improve long term employment outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities (Benz et al., 1997; Lindstrom et al., 2013; Poppen et al., 2017; Shandra & Hogan, 2008). If delivered appropriately, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services to all individuals who need them would have a lasting impact on individual's lives and the broader economy. We just need to figure how.

### **Continuum of Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Youth and Students with Disabilities**

VR service for youth, as we know them today under WIOA and the Rehabilitation Act, consist of a continuum of services that include: (1) pre-employment transition services; (2) transition services; and (3) individualized vocational rehabilitation services (U.S. Department of Education, 2020; Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Customer Services Manual, 2020).



The availability of which services on this continuum an individual can access, is based upon how these individual's characteristics align with one or more of the following five groupings:

1. *Youth with Disabilities* - include any individual with a disability between the ages for 14 and 24, including those who are not enrolled in an educational program.
2. *Student with a Disability* - includes any individual who is at least 14 and not older than 21, enrolled in an educational program, and is eligible for and

receiving special education or related services under IDEA, or is an individual with a disability for the purposes of Section 504.

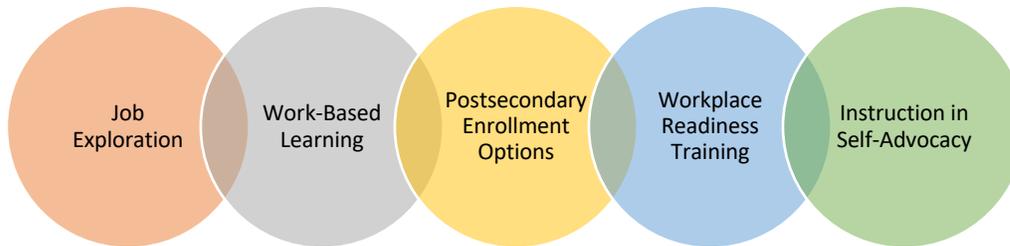
3. *Potentially Eligible Student with a Disability* - any student with a disability.
4. *Youth or students who have been determined eligible for VR services and are on the waitlist for services*
5. *Youth or students who have been determined eligible for VR services and have an approved Individualized Plan for Employment*

**Pre-Employment Transition Services.** Pre-employment transition services are the newest set of VR services along the continuum of what services are available to youth with disabilities. These services are one of the core features of the considerably expansive changes that were made to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by the WIOA of 2014. Pre-employment transition services are not available to all youth with disabilities, or youth or students with disabilities who have been determined eligible for VR services and have an approved Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). Rather, these services are available to all potentially eligible students with a disability; and, students who have applied for VR services, were receiving pre-employment transition services prior to applying for VR services but have been put on the waitlist because of order of selections.

Pre-employment transition services must be arranged for or provided by a VR agency and delivered in coordination with a local school. These services must be based upon an individual's need and cannot duplicate the transition services that are provided by the student's educational program. These services must not delay the transition planning process, and prior written consent from the student or their guardian is required before the services can be delivered. Documentation of the service is also required.

Under the amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 made by WIOA of 2014, state VR agencies are required to set aside 15% of their federal funds to pay for pre-employment transition services, pre-employment transition service coordination, or a set of *authorized services* that can be provided if funds are available after ensuring services have been provided all potentially eligible students. The funds that are set aside cannot be used to pay for any administrative costs associated with the delivery of pre-employment transition services, or any other VR service not listed in Section 113 (b) through (d) of the Rehabilitation Act.

Pre-employment transition services consist of a set of individualized or group services that are coordinated or delivered by VR and fit into one of the following five categories: (1) job exploration counseling; (2) work-based learning experiences; (3) counseling on postsecondary enrollment options; (4) workplace readiness training; or (5) instruction in self-advocacy, including peer mentoring. (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 113 [b]).



Pre-employment transition services coordination includes: (1) attending IEP meetings (when invited); (2) developing work opportunities for students with disabilities in partnership with workforce development boards, one-stop centers, and employers; (3) working with school to coordinate and ensure the provision of pre-employment transition services; and (4) attending person-centered planning meetings for individuals receiving services under title XIX of the Social Security Act. (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 113 [c]).

Authorized activities, which can only be paid for with the 15% set aside after ensuring pre-employment transitions services have been provided to all potentially eligible students with disabilities, include: (1) implementing effective strategies to increase the likelihood of independent living and community and workplace inclusion; (2) developing an improving strategies for independent living, participation in postsecondary education experiences, and obtaining competitive employment; (3) instruction to vocational rehabilitation counselors, school transition personnel or others supporting students with disabilities; (4) disseminating information about innovative and effective practices; (5) coordinating activities with transition services provided under IDEA; (6) applying evidence-based findings to improve policy, procedures, practice and the preparation of personnel to better achieve the goals in Sections 113 (b) through (d); (7) developing model demonstration projects; (8) establishing or supporting multistate or regional partnerships; or (9) dissemination information to improve transition to postsecondary activities of individuals who are members of traditionally unserved populations. (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 113 [d]). Further, if any of the 15% federal set aside is not spent on pre-employment

transition services, their coordination, or authorized activities the funds must be returned.

***Vocational Rehabilitation Transition Services.*** VR Transition Services are another set of services along the continuum of VR services that are available to students and youth with disabilities. This category of VR services has been in place since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and remains largely unchanged in spite of the amendments made by the WIOA of 2014. VR Transition Services are outcome-oriented services that are designed to support the movement from the receipt of school services to the receipt of services from VR agencies, or other state agencies, as appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). VR transition services are a more narrowly defined set of group or individualized services than pre-employment transition services, and are available to students who are likely to benefit from Individualized VR services. Not all potentially eligible students with disabilities are likely to benefit from Individualized VR services, and that is a determination made by a VR Counselor. While the pattern of VR Transition Services will vary from state to state, these services usually involve participation in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development, support with referral and application to VR services (if determined appropriate during the IEP development process), support with the VR eligibility determination process (if determined appropriate during the IEP development process), and the development and implementation of a VR Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). VR Transition Services are available to individuals whose disability interferes with their ability to work and must need vocational rehabilitation services to obtain or maintain employment.

***Individualized Vocational Rehabilitation Services.*** Individualized Vocational Rehabilitation services are the final set of services along the continuum and are available to students and individuals with disabilities who have submitted an application to DVR, have been determined eligible for services, and are on an approved Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). These services are based upon an individual's goals and unique functional limitations and barriers to employment. Individual VR services may include, but are not limited to: assessment, other services, transportation services, VR counseling and guidance, job placement assistance, job search assistance, job readiness training, occupational/vocational training, on-the-job supports, information and referral services, college or university training, diagnoses and treatment of impairments, job development, job preparation, on-the-job training, job placement, job retention, rehabilitation technology, basic remedial or literacy training, job coaching, disability related augmentative skills training, maintenance,

miscellaneous training, interpreter services, technical assistance services, personal attendant services, and reader services (Poppen, et al., 2016).

**Summary of VR Services for Youth and Students with Disabilities.** To summarize, VR services for youth, as we know them today under WIOA and the Rehabilitation Act, consist of a continuum of services that include: (1) pre-employment transition services; (2) VR transition services; and (3) individualized vocational rehabilitation services (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Pre-employment transition services are the most broadly available services, which are available to all potentially eligible students with disabilities. VR Transition Services are a narrower set of services available to students who are likely to need and benefit from individualized VR services and designed to support the transition from school-based transition services to services provided by VR or other adult disability service providers. Lastly, individualized VR services are available to individuals who have been determined eligible to receive VR services and have an approved Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). It is outside of the scope of the report to discuss the eligibility determination process, or order of selections and the impact this has on services. More information on these elements can be found in state documents.

### **Washington: Implementation of the Continuum of VR Services for Youth and Students**

As a state, Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (WA-DVR) has worked hard to develop and implement systems and structures to better support the coordination and delivery of the continuum of VR services to youth and students with disabilities in Washington. These efforts serve as evidence of WA-DVR's steadfast commitment to increasing the employment outcomes of youth and students with disabilities, and to do so collaboratively with critical stakeholder (individuals, families, service contractors, educators and agencies, workforce development systems, etc.) feedback. In this section we will briefly summarize some of what we know about the efforts WA-DVR has taken to implement the continuum of VR services under WIOA.

**Washington: Pre-Employment Transition Services.** WA-DVR has taken several steps to meet the requirement of WIOA and ensure the provision and coordination of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities. While not an exhaustive list, several of these efforts are summarized here, including: (1) formal interagency agreements; (2) needs assessments; and (3) the designation of staff and structures for direct service delivery.

*Formal Interagency Agreements.* Consistent with regulations, WA-DVR has led the establishment of a formal interagency agreement between the Department of Social and Health Services Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (WA-DVR), Washington State Department of Services for the Blind (WA-DSB), and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to strengthen the interagency partnerships and clarify roles and responsibilities. Among other purposes, this agreement includes a commitment for all partners to identify potentially eligible students with disabilities as early as possible, communicate regularly to identify and address gaps in services, promote individualized and student-centered planning, think expansively about student transition teams, promote seamless transitions, and share training materials. Within the agreement, some of the specific responsibilities of WA-DVR include: (a) promoting collaborative efforts between VR staff and Local Education Agencies (LEA) to facilitate the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services, and transition services; (b) providing or arranging for the provision of pre-employment transition services, or transition services, to potentially eligible students with disabilities who need them, in collaboration with LEA's; (c) collaborating with LEA's to identify potentially eligible students with disabilities who may need pre-employment transition services, or transition services, and the range of available VR services; and, (d) developing and approving Individualized Plans for Employment (IPE) as early as possible during the transition planning process to facilitate a seamless transition into the full range of individualized vocational rehabilitation services available to those who qualify. The formal interagency agreement also discusses the fiscal responsibilities associated with the provision of transition services and pre-employment transition services, including the information that WA-DVR will not financially replace the services an LEA is already providing, and that local LEA and VR staff should work together to determine which pre-employment transition services may be provided by WA-DVR. The invested reader is encouraged to review this agreement in its completion ([link here](#)).

*Needs Assessments.* An additional effort that has been taken by WA-DVR to support the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services, includes bi-annual needs assessments to identify the number of potentially eligible students with disabilities and their need for additional pre-employment transition services. The first needs assessment was conducted by the Center for Change in Transition Services during the 2016/2017 school year, and used existing data from OSPI and a school level evaluation of transition practices to estimate that there were 49,812 potentially eligible students with disabilities throughout the state, and that between 17,500 and 29,500 of these students were in need of additional pre-employment transition services because they are not engaging in this activities as a part of the transition

services that are being provided through their school transition planning services (Johnson & Poppen, 2017; WA-DVR State Plan, 2020). The second needs assessment took place during the 2019/2020 school year and was conducted by the WSU Research and Innovation in Special Education. The needs assessment included the dissemination of the Transition Services Self-Assessment Tool (TSAT) designed specifically to measure the availability, accessibility, and coordination of school-based transition services that align with one or more of the five pre-employment transition service categories (Poppen & Alsalamah, 2020). The TSAT was completed by 55% of the public high schools in Washington and suggested that on average, 74% of the 97 services listed on the TSAT were available in each of these schools, and that on average between 26-50% of all potentially eligible students with disabilities were accessing these services. Based upon 2019 estimates provided by OSPI that report there were 47,734 potentially eligible students with disabilities in Washington, the results from the TSAT suggest that between 23,867 - 35,323 students were not accessing these school-based transition services and may be in need of additional pre-employment transition services (Poppen & Alsalamah, 2020). Moreover, the data suggest the largest gaps in services fall within work-based learning experiences and instruction in self-advocacy. Through open ended questions on the TSAT, the data also suggest there is a need for additional training for VR counselors, school staff and others; and, that issues of inconsistency and poor follow through from VR counselors should be addressed through streamlining processes, points of contact, and ease of access for students, families, and schools (Poppen & Alsalamah, 2020). A complete copy of the 2020 needs assessment can be [downloaded here](#).

*Staff and Structures.* Another critical step that WA-DVR has taken to meet the requirements of WIOA has included the designation of staff and structures to directly provide pre-employment transition services to potentially eligible students with disabilities (WA-DVR State Plan, 2020). One element of this includes the creation of a Regional Transition Consultants (RTC's), who's responsibility is to work throughout their region to plan and coordinate the delivery of pre-employment transition services, ensure outreach to schools, ensure coordinated services are based on need, monitor the delivery of pre-employment transition services contracts, and provide the direct delivery of pre-employment transition services. RTC's are supervised by a DVR Regional Administrator. The number of RTC's throughout the state has varied since the position was first introduced in 2016, ranging from 3 - 13. Furthermore, these individuals are supported by a Statewide Secondary Transition Manager who helps to coordinate statewide transition activities, professional development opportunities for staff and stakeholders, and to identify and establish practices and programs to better support the coordination and delivery of transition and pre-employment transition

services. Together, the individuals within these roles have taken great strides in addressing the needs identified through the needs assessments and strengthening relationships and partnerships with local schools, identifying service needs, and creatively addressing gaps in services by coordinating services with schools, community rehabilitation providers (CRP's) and providing direct services to students. An additional staffing and structural change that has been made since the authorization also includes the development and maintenance of contracts and partnerships with CRP's, educational agencies, community colleges, and workforce agencies to specifically provide direct pre-employment transition services to potentially eligible students with disabilities. These contracts are wider in scope than how DVR has contracted with service providers in the past and are managed by the Statewide Secondary Transition Manager and coordinated in partnership with RTC's. While the steps described above are not exhaustive, they do summarize some of the key steps that WA-DVR has taken meet the requirement of WIOA and ensure the provision and coordination of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities. Through these efforts, WA-DVR has worked tirelessly to increase the availability, accessibility, and coordination of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities; though, they are not immune to the same national challenges that states are experiencing and continue to face an uphill battle towards meeting the requirements of WIOA and ensuring all students who need these services receive them.

**Washington: VR Transition Services and Individualized VR Services.** The second and third set of services along the continuum of VR services for youth and students with disabilities are reserved for a much smaller group of students than those who are eligible to receive pre-employment transition services. These include: (a) VR Transition Services; and, (b) Individualized VR Services. The policies and procedures regarding the delivery of these services are longer standing than they are for pre-employment transition services, and elements of their provision have been in place since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, or earlier. VR transition services are only available to students who are likely to benefit from individualized VR services (a determination made by a VR counselor), and Individualized VR Services are only available to individuals who have an approved Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). As a reference to how many fewer students receive these kinds of services than should be receiving pre-employment transition services ( $n \approx 47,000$ ), a neighboring state that has a population that is about half the size of Washington provided transition services and individualized VR services to on average fewer than 1,000 individuals a year between 2003 and 2013 (Poppen, 2014); which may suggest that Washington provides these services to about 2,000 individuals a year (which is less

than 4% of the estimated number of potentially eligible students with disabilities in the state). WA-DVR has not had to re-design these service delivery systems in the same way that they have had to do with pre-employment transition services; but, that does not mean coordination is not required.

In Washington, VR transition services include consultation and participation in a student's IEP to discuss the need for transition services based upon the student's preferences, interests, needs and strengths; referral and application, if transition services are determined appropriate for the student; support with the VR eligibility determination process and any assessment services that may be needed; and the development of an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) (Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Customer Services Manual, 2020). Within the state, WA-DVR has assigned each high school a liaison VR counselor who works closely with the school to provide outreach to schools; maintain close collaborative relationships with students, families and teachers; and support a seamless transition to VR services for those who may qualify for individualized VR services. A useful tool has been posted on the WA-DVR website that easily connects school personnel to their high school liaison VR counselor. While often seen as the primary DVR contact among schools, students, families and stakeholders (Poppen & Alsalamah, 2020), high school VR liaison counselors are not responsible for ensuring the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to the larger group of all potentially eligible youth with disabilities within the schools they are assigned to work closely with - those responsibilities fall under the team of Regional Transition Consultants (RTC's) and the Statewide Secondary Transition Manager who often work separately with a school from the high school liaison VR counselor.

**Covid Context Statement.** The 18 months leading up the production of this report was overshadowed by the Covid-19 Global Pandemic. Washington was one of the first states in the United States to move the majority of their education and health services to a virtual platform, which included the schools and agencies providing the services described in this report ([OSPI, 2020](#)). The global pandemic did not change any of the requirements for these agencies to deliver services to their intended audiences, but it did introduce a unique set of challenges and contexts that required innovation. It is difficult to say whether or not these challenges and context impeded or enhanced the successful delivery and coordination of these services.

**Summary of Washington's Implementation of the Continuum of VR Services.** To summarize, WA-DVR has worked hard to develop and implement systems and structures to better support the coordination and delivery of the continuum of VR

services to youth and students with disabilities in Washington. Most recently, substantive efforts have been put into the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services through the establishment of interagency agreements, needs assessments, and staffing and structural changes. All the while, WA-DVR has maintained its systems to provide services to the modest number of youth and students with disabilities who may qualify for VR Transition Services and Individualized VR Services.

## **National Models of Coordinated Transition Service Delivery**

Implementation strategies for Pre-employment transition services delivery and collaborative models between VR and K-12 are still relatively new. However, there are some service delivery models to review. The following overview of service delivery models is not intended to be comprehensive or to fully describe all program features. It is designed to serve as a starting place for understanding available options and to provide ideas for expansion and innovation going forward. At this point many of these models are broad sets of guidelines and recommendations rather than manualized programs that are codified and could be directly replicated in additional settings.

***Pre-Employment Transition Services: A guide for Collaboration Among State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and Education Partners.*** The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT, 2020) produced a guide called Pre-Employment Transition Services: A Guide for Collaboration Among State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and Education Partners. This guide explores some fundamental needs for a successful VR and school collaboration to implement pre-employment transition services. This collaboration guide emphasizes four major strategies: (a) shared understanding of transition services, (b) building your local partnership; (c) coordination and collaboration for individual student planning; and (d) partnering with families.

*Shared Understanding of Transition Services.* The first strategy is to build a shared understanding of IEP transition services, pre-employment transition services, the continuum of VR services, and coordinating Individual Education Plans (IDEA) and Individual Plans for Employment (VR). This is an important strategy because overall there is a lot of mis-understanding and/or limited knowledge about the ways schools and VR agencies can work together.

*Building Your Local Partnership.* The second strategy is to building local partnerships and improv communication between schools, VR, and VR contractors. Strong emphasis is placed on the need to improve processes and logistics to allow for regular collaboration between the students and teachers in the schools and the VR counselors. In addition to these processes, strong coordination between the transition plan in the IEP and VR services is described as a critical feature. This includes coordination and outreach to other community partners including businesses, independent living centers, Developmental Disability Agencies, and other relevant stakeholders.

*Coordination and Collaboration for Individual Student Planning.* The third strategy if planning and making time for collaboration. This is critical for improving transition services. This section emphasizes the importance of providing time and support for the student’s person-centered planning to be the leading force in the collaborative VR and school supports.

*Partnering with Families: Reimagining the Possibilities.* While family engagement is not one of the pre-employment transition services activities defined in WIOA it can potentially positively impact these services by helping to shift mindsets away from caring for people with disabilities to SUPPORTING people with disabilities. This is critically important when working to improve outcomes for students with disabilities who are from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Partnering with culturally and linguistically diverse families can help ensure they are aware of resources to support their learner with disabilities as they transition to adulthood.

The NTACTION pre-employment transition services collaboration guide outlines the fundamental features for successful VR and school collaborations. The following models follow these principles but have some additional details and unique features in their strategies for implementation.

**Guideposts for Success.** Lueking et al. (2018) describes a model demonstration project involving 400 students with disabilities who were deemed at risk. The individual schools in the project were able to select a specific group of students to participate (at risk to drop out, students with cognitive disabilities on a certificate track, etc.). The intervention was a 3-year program based on the Guideposts for Success program.

The parts of the intervention are very similar but not exactly the same as the five pre-employment transition services criteria. Though there is clearly some overlap in the

first three and pre-employment transition services, the remaining four program components focus on systems improvement rather than direct services to the student/client.

1. Discovery
2. Individualized work experiences
3. Individualized paid integrated employment
4. Family Supports
5. Early VR case Initiation
6. Systems Linkages and collaboration
7. Coordination with teachers and instructional staff

Leuking et al.'s evaluation of the model demonstration project supported "the potential effectiveness of a career/work-focused transition intervention on improving employment outcomes for transitioning youth regardless of disability" (2018, p. 163). Along with many common elements the strong emphasis on supports for family engagement in the collaboration process and the early initiation of VR services are strong program features.

**CIRCLES.** CIRCLES is a detailed model of implementation with a strong emphasis on communication, building a collaborative group of professionals in the community, and building capacity (Povenire-Kirk, et al., 2017). According to their handbook "The CIRCLES model involves three levels of interagency collaboration including a Community Level Team, a School Level Team, and an IEP Team." This was designed to address common failings in current transition planning in K-12 which put the emphasis on special education teachers to initiate the process of outreach to DVR services.

Circles addresses this challenge by shifting the collaboration focus from being a special education teacher or VR counselor initiated processes to a community based one. Interagency workgroups share information, resources, and engage to actively collaborate to address the diversity of students VR and post school needs. This capacity building approach aims to reduce the barriers to collaboration and service delivery through broad stakeholder involvement. Rather than the special education teacher being responsible to contact possible VR providers to attend IEP meetings, CIRCLES aims have the community of professionals actively involved in building capacity and actively identifying students that need VR services.

**Oregon Youth Transition Program.** Established in 1990, the Oregon Youth Transition Program (YTP) is a collaborative partnership between the office of Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation, Oregon Department of Education, and the University of Oregon (Alverson, et al., 2021). YTP's purpose is to prepare youth with disabilities for employment or career related postsecondary education or training. What began as a three-year federal grant to seven schools has spread into a majority of Oregon high schools over the last 25 years. One of the unique resources in the YTP are a collection of resources providing very detailed connections explaining IDEA and DVR policy. These resources include plain language explanations of roles and responsibilities, collaboration frameworks, and procedures for what to do when things are not going well. The basic steps of organizing the team and information to promote successful transition outcomes includes:

1. Identifying the YTP team.
2. Developing roles and responsibilities for each team member.
3. Meeting regularly as a team and create a format for documenting supervision and collaboration among team members.
4. Developing strategies for collecting student information and tracking student progress.

***Summary of National Models of Coordinated Transition Service Delivery.***

Common elements of these models include the emphasis on identifying the collaborative team members and clearly communicating roles and responsibilities. All continue to provide a high degree of flexibility in the design and delivery of VR services to allow for the wide variety of individual student needs. In K-12 schools there is a clear hierarchy and defined roles and responsibilities. Based on these models, school and DVR collaborations are likely to be more complex and less hierarchical. These models include an emphasis on initially identifying stakeholders and defining roles and responsibilities in the collaboration.

Pre-employment transition services delivery in schools in collaboration with DVR is still in its early phases. One limitation of the currently identified models is a lack of specificity. Unlike an IEP which has rigid enforceable deadlines and requirements that can easily be reviewed for being in or out of compliance, the pre-employment transition services delivery models do not have one single method of reporting. They likely do not need one single method of reporting either. However, increased clarity of pre-employment transition services delivery strategies, internal procedures, consistent clear expectations for contact hours and collaboration with schools, increased communication on IEP transition plans and DVR's IPE plans, and more

information on intervention strategies plus data on their effectiveness are needed. This increased clarity on pre-employment transition services delivery could help determine effective interventions, compare outcomes, revise programs when needed, and replicate best practices so that educators and vocational rehabilitation specialist can improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

### **Washington Transition Program (WTP): A Model Demonstration Project**

As previously stated, research has provided evidence that students who receive transition services within the contexts of a coordinated transition service delivery model experience greater postsecondary employment outcomes than those whose transition services were provided in isolated contexts (Benz et al., 1997; Lindstrom et al., 2013; Poppen et al., 2017; Shandra & Hogan, 2008). By observing these coordinated service delivery models and the unique context of transition service delivery and coordination in Washington, we have established a set of 9 critical features that when combined form the Washington Transition Program (WTP). The WTP is a systems level, capacity building model that will be piloted in 3-5 sites during the 2021/2022 school year. The ultimate goal of the WTP is to ensure that pre-employment transition services are available to all potentially eligible students with disabilities who need them, and to provide a collaborative structure that will support the implementation of a seamless set of coordinated transition services for youth and young adults with disabilities (including other services along the continuum of VR services). In this section, we summarize the 9 critical features of WTP, and discuss the criteria for identifying the initial set of sites.

***Essential Features of the Washington Transition Program.*** The WTP includes the following 9 critical features: (1) student focused and culturally responsive transition planning; (2) transition leadership teams and team building; (3) professional development on school and VR partnerships; (4) needs assessment; (5) goal setting and action planning; (6) plan implementation and progress monitoring; (7) ongoing technical assistance and professional development; and (8) post-assessment, evaluation, and planning for sustainability; and (9) annual site showcase. The following figure provides an overview of the WTP and a summary of each of these critical features is described below.

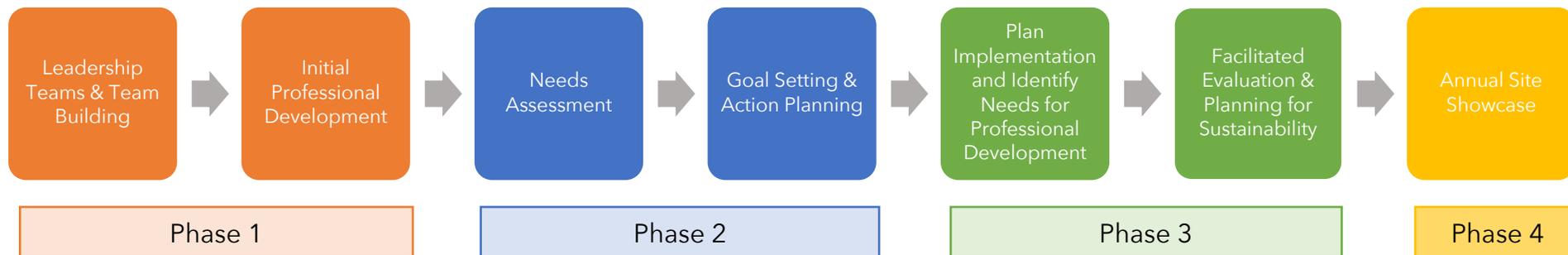


# WASHINGTON TRANSITION PROGRAM

## Essential Features of the Washington Transition Program (WTP)

The Washington Transition Program (WTP) will build local capacity to improve coordination between schools and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and increase the availability and accessibility of coordinated transition services for youth and young adults with disabilities, including pre-employment transition services. Pilot sites will develop a local transition leadership team that includes key players involved in the coordination and delivery of school and community based transition services. These teams will be guided by a WTP Technical Assistance Provider from Washington State University (WSU) through team building, self-assessment, action planning and evaluation activities focused on improving the coordination and delivery of services, and will participate in cross-site learning. Key players must have a passion for creative problem solving and improving student outcomes, and support from administrators to join the team. It's estimated that each team member will need to devote about 2-5 hours/week to the process during the school year.

### Student Focused and Culturally Responsive Transition Planning



Ongoing Support & Professional Development from WTP Technical Assistance Team

*Student-Focused Planning.* The WTP will embody a student-focused planning approach that will support the program's goals of increasing access to pre-employment transition services, and other transition services for all youth and students with disabilities. Within the WTP, the operationalization of this approach will stem from the efforts of scholars to quantify the process and outcomes of person-centered planning (Holburn et al., 2000). Student-focused planning, like person-centered planning, is a philosophy that aligns an individual's services and supports with their preferences, interests, and capacities (Holburn et al., 2000). Within a student-focused approach, the individual and other key stakeholders are involved in the planning process and the individual is in the driver's seat. Moreover, the services and supports that are provided foster inclusion, respect, and relationship, and includes natural supports (Holburn et al., 2000). Within this approach, planning for students is collaborative and reoccurring, the team works to facilitate the best experiences and opportunities that they can, and the individual is satisfied with services and supports they receive (Holburn et al., 2000). As a critical feature of the WTP, student focused planning will be used to inform capacity building and processes that are developed to facilitate individuals' access and engagement in services; this will include supports for the school-based transition planning process, and activities such as career exploration, work-based learning experiences, etc.

*Team Building.* The development of site transition leadership teams and supporting these teams to engage in facilitated team building is a critical feature of the WTP. Site transition leadership teams will play a critical role in improving the availability, accessibility, quality, and coordination of school-based and student focused transition services. The purpose of the transition leadership teams will allow each stakeholder to understand their roles in supporting transition aged youth, developing a common language, and understanding of VR and the services available. transition leadership team will consist of various stakeholders to be involved in a collaborative decision-making process and implementation of career exploration, work-based learning, and other transition related services for youth and young adults with disabilities. If a site consists of multiple schools (e.g., district), there will also need to be an overarching site leadership team, accompanied by a leadership team within each school in the site.

A school leadership team will consist of as many of the following roles as possible:

- Special Education Teacher
- Transition Specialists/Paraprofessionals who provide transition services
- Section 504 Plan Coordinator

- Career and Technical Educator
- School Psychologist/Counselor
- School Administrator
- DVR Counselor Liaison
- DVR Regional Transition Consultant

Each site transition leadership team will be led by a Team Lead, which is likely to be a Special Education teacher or Director within the site who is responsible for coordinating school-based transition services for students receiving special education services. The responsibilities of the “Team Lead” will include:

- Acting as a participating member of the team
- Facilitating the team problem solving process and constructive communication
- Promoting engagement and on-task behaviors among team members through good listening, reflections, questions, and big-picture thinking
- Managing Transition Services Self-Assessment Tool (TSAT) data on the Portal for Supporting Successful Outcomes (PSSO)
- Maintaining meeting records, and notes; an effective digital file management system accessible to team members; and an email list to provide summaries, updates, and encourage correspondence
- Scheduling team meetings as necessary
- Coordinating with other Team Leads as necessary
- Engaging with the WTP Project Management and Technical Assistance Team

During a site’s participation in the WTP, leadership teams will meet no fewer than 4 times each school year (twice in the Fall; twice in the Spring) and will have the opportunity to participate in supplemental professional development and program events throughout the year. Team Leads will be expected to participate in additional meetings with the WTP project management and technical assistance team in preparation and training for their team’s activities.

*Professional Development on Collaborative Partnerships.* During the first Transition Leadership Team the WTP project management and technical assistance team will (in addition to facilitated Team Building) provide a professional development unit on the importance of transition services for youth and young adults with disabilities; content on State and National policies and regulations informing transition services for students with disabilities (e.g., IDEA, WIOA, Rehabilitation Act, OSPI/DVR/DSB MOU, DVR Customer Handbook), and information about how school-based transition services provided by schools in Washington can be improved through coordination

with DVR and engagement in the continuum of WA-DVR's continuum of transition services (e.g., Pre-Employment Transition Services, Transition Services, and Individualized Vocational Rehabilitation Services). Participants will leave the first Leadership Team meeting with a common understanding of what services can be made available to students with disabilities, who can provide which services along the continuum, and how those services can be identified, coordinated, and delivered.

*Needs Assessment.* After the initial site Transition Leadership Team Meeting, the members of a site's transition leadership team will work collaboratively to engage in a self-assessment process using the Transition Services Self-Assessment Tool (TSAT). The TSAT will provide information about the broad availability, accessibility, and coordination of 97 school-based transition services that align with one or more of the five pre-employment transition service categories. These data will subsequently be used to drive a goal setting and action planning process and areas needed for further professional development and support. An example TSAT summary report can be downloaded [here](#). This process will be supported by WTP project management from a distance to allow for the leadership team to build leadership capacity and coordinate the Transition Team's engagement in the process. This will ensure each member completes the TSTA prior to the second meeting of the year and prepare for the next part of the WTP, Goal Setting and Action Planning.

*Goal Setting and Action Planning.* The next essential feature of the project is to use the results from the self-assessment to support site leadership teams to collaboratively develop a plan that addresses gaps in services that are identified through the self-assessment. This data-based decision-making process integrates practices and suggestions from the Center on Response to Intervention, a Theoretical Framework for Data-Driven Decision Making (Mandinach et al., 2006), the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition Annual Capacity Building Institute, and other common practices in program evaluation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

Using the self-assessment data, leadership teams will be brought together to engage in a review of their data, and a guided process to identify gaps in the availability, accessibility, and coordination of school-based transition services. Leadership teams will be guided through a series of questions and discussions that use visual summary reports to highlight the strengths and needs of their service and service delivery systems. Teams will then be guided through a process of using these strengths and needs to identify goals and objectives that will improve the extent to which coordinated transition services are made available to the potentially eligible students with disabilities within the site. Within the WTP, this process is labeled as "Action

Planning.” During the action planning process, site teams will be asked to identify professional development and training needs that they will need to support their goals. For example, teams will identify specific tasks that will be taken to achieve goals, the people who will be responsible for each of these tasks, and timelines for the completion. Using this information, the WTP project management and technical assistance team will work to compile evidence-based resources and provide teams with professional development on these resources. Each site will have the opportunity to participate in at least one individualized professional development event in the Fall to help accomplish their goals. Through the process, teams will work to identify possible roadblocks to accomplish their goals, strategies to overcome these roadblocks, evidence that their goal was met, data that will be used to provide evidence, additional stakeholders who should be involved in the process, and additional supports that are needed.

*Action Plan Implementation and Progress Monitoring.* Another critical feature of the WTP will include a site’s implementation and progress monitoring of their action plan. Throughout the course of the academic year, the leadership team will work individually and collaboratively to implement the steps that they have outlined on their action plan. The leadership team will meet throughout the year to review their progress, celebrate their successes and identify needs. The progress monitoring activities will be led by each site’s Team Lead, with the support of the WTP project management and technical assistance team. It is recommended that each site’s Transition Leadership Team meet on an at least monthly basis but are required to meet as a team at least once before Winter Break and then again no less than three times during the Spring (January - May). During these times the Leadership Team will be reviewing progress and working towards their goal to improve the availability, accessibility, quality and coordination of transition services. During the Fall, the team will identify a specific area that they would like professional development and then during one of the three required Spring meetings, one will include a professional development provided by the WTP project management and technical assistance team, and the final meeting will include a facilitated evaluation and planning for sustainability process.

*Ongoing Professional Development and Ongoing Supports.* In addition to the initial professional development focused on school and VR partnerships, throughout the implementation of each site’s action plan, new professional development needs may arise. The WTP project management and technical assistance team will be responsive to these needs and offer professional development and other ongoing supports (e.g., individual meetings, team meetings, etc.) to site leads and teams as needed. At a

minimum, during the first Transition Leadership Team meeting after the winter break, the WTP Project management and technical assistance team will provide an individualized professional development training to each site. Ongoing professional development will encourage external collaboration with other schools and districts, opportunities to build District/Regional/Statewide Capacity, and get people connected to resources that are available at each of these levels.

*Post-Assessment, Evaluation, and Planning for Sustainability.* Another critical feature of the WTP is support to teams in evaluating the effectiveness of their data-driven plan by completing a post-assessment and reflecting on their progress and planning for sustainability. Upon the close of the school year, teams will follow a similar process that they took when completing an initial TSAT assessment to complete a post-assessment. The team will then get together to discuss their progress during the year, review their data to see if there have been any significant changes in patterns of transition services, and determine if they would like to work together again in the coming school year to address any additional gaps that they observe.

*Annual Site Showcase.* For each year of the WTP, there will be an annual showcase that will highlight the transition activities and innovations that each of the WTP sites have taken to help increase the availability and coordination of transition services to youth and students with disabilities. This showcase may be in person, but it may also be virtual, depending on which format would make the event most accessible and beneficial to participants. During the showcase, there will be a welcome and introduction to set the stage of the event, followed by brief presentations from each of the sites. There will then be some opportunities for networking and collaboration across sites. Additional professional development offered by the WTP project management and technical assistance team may also be available if requested or beneficial.

*Planning for Sustainability.* Another critical feature of the WTP is support to teams to build capacity in providing services to transition-aged youth and ensuring that all who are potentially eligible receive pre-employment transition services. Therefore, by supporting teams to evaluate the effectiveness of their data-driven plan by completing a post-assessment and reflecting on their progress and planning for sustainability. Upon the close of the school year, teams will follow a similar process that they took when completing an initial TSAT assessment to complete a post-assessment. The team will then discuss their progress during the year, review their data to see if there have been any significant changes in patterns of transition services, and determine if they would like to continue to work together again in the

coming school year to address any additional gaps that they observe. This will be the final team meeting of the year and separate from the annual site showcase. The sustainability plan will encourage external collaboration with other schools and districts and connecting the teams with state and national resources to support with continued collaboration and service delivery.

***Role of WSU Project Directors/Capacity Building.*** Throughout the duration of the project the WTP project management and technical assistance team will play a substantial role in facilitating the processes and procedures outlines in the description above. Each of the sites will be assigned a primary technical assistance provider who will be responsible for guiding the co-leads and transition leadership team through the capacity building process, as well as, provide transition related professional development and resources to the team as needed. This technical assistance provider will conduct monthly meetings with each site's co-leads, attend all transition leadership team meetings, offer professional development and resources, and regularly correspond electronically with members of their sites' teams. In addition to working individually with a site, the primary technical assistance provider will coordinate with other members on the WTP Project Management and Technical Assistance team and think more globally about how things are working across sites and adjust accordingly. They will also work collaboratively to plan and conduct the annual showcase and evaluate the implementation of the WTP. This team meets for 2-hours on an every other week basis and this will their substantial task during the 2021/2022 year.

***Selecting Sites for the Washington Transition Program.*** During Summer 2021, the WTP project management and technical assistance team will work to identify 3-5 sites to participate in the pilot model demonstration project during the 2021/2022 school year. It is the objective that the sites that are selected have chosen to participate in the program on their own volition and have the leadership and motivation to collaboratively improve their site's coordinated delivery of transition services and increase the accessibility of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities. A site may be a single school and their VR partner, or a consortium of schools and their VR partner(s).

While a site's transition leadership team will consist of many key stakeholders, none will be more important in the site selection process than a commitment from a VR high school counselor liaison, VR RTC, and Special Education Team Lead. Given the critical role of the VR high school counselor liaison in supporting a seamless transition to individualized VR services for potentially eligible students with disabilities, this

element of their role as laid out in the WA-DVR Customer Service Manual (2020), concerns reported from education partners in the statewide needs assessment about the varying quality of these relationships throughout the state (Poppen & Alsalamah, 2020), and the higher likelihood of finding committed school and VR RTC partners; the commitment from a VR high school counselor liaison in the site selection process is perhaps the most tenuous. It is estimated that throughout their participation in the program, each of these key stakeholders will need to commit to 2-5 hours a week during the school year to support the efforts of the program, along with the time needed to support increased delivery of services to students. To the benefit of this commitment, each partner's participation should fall clearly within their respective job responsibilities and duties.

In addition to the commitment of the VR high school counselor liaison, VR RTC, and Special Education Team Lead, a site must also have administrative support - which includes school administration and VR administration. These administrators must understand and sign off on the dedication of staff time and effort to focus on the priorities of the project. As a part of the commitment, a memorandum of understanding will be created between each education partner, VR partner, and WTP to clearly lay out roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Preference for site selection will be given to sites that represent a diverse element among participants (e.g., urban, rural, size, economic contexts, population of students served, ethnic and racial composition, etc.), and who have prior experience working together as a team. However, commitment of key stakeholders will take precedence over these preferential factors.

The selection of sites will begin with conversations between the WTP project management team, the statewide secondary transition manager, and the VR RTC to identify any potential known sites that meet the selection criteria described above. Upon selection, the high school VR counselor liaison and the prospective special education team lead will be contacted to gauge their interest and availability to participate. If these partners are interested, steps will be taken to provide more information about the expectations and scope for participating, administrative approval sought, and an agreement formed. If these steps do not result in 3-5 potential sites, a statewide call will be distributed to high school VR counselor liaisons to see if there are any within the state who would like to consider one of their school partnerships to participate as a site for the project. Any leads will be seriously followed. If once again, 3-5 potential sites are unable to be identified through this process, the WTP project management team and technical assistance team will use

their networks to identify education partners who would like to participate; and ask for VR administrative support for their school's VR partners to participate in the project. It should be noted, within a context where there is an abundance of strong and committed partnerships between high school VR counselor liaisons, VR RTC, and education partners; the WTP project management team may ask teams to submit a joint statement to describe why their site should be selected, and how their participation may benefit the students that they serve. Furthermore, in a context with an abundance of interested sites, the preferential factors described previously will also be taken into consideration.

**Summary of the Washington Transition Program.** The WTP is intended to be a systems level model demonstration project that will support sites in increasing the availability, accessibility, and coordination of pre-employment transition services (and other elements of the continuum of VR services) for students and young adults with disabilities. These efforts are aligned with federal and state policy, address some of the current needs within the state, and are hypothesized to improve transition outcomes for students with disabilities, the prosperity of the U.S. workforce, economic growth, and global competitiveness. The WTP model demonstration project includes the formation of site-based teams who will work together to assess and identify the needs within their site, and work collaboratively and creatively (with the support of professional development and technical assistance) to address those needs. A variety of key stakeholders within each site will be needed to successfully build capacity and address gaps. The WTP also aims to establish a broader community of transition providers among site participants and will also provide opportunities for sites to exchange innovation and support to one another to better their services to students. The ultimate goal of the WTP is to ensure that pre-employment transition services are available to all potentially eligible students with disabilities who need them, and to provide a collaborative structure that will support the implementation of a seamless set of coordinated transition services for youth and young adults with disabilities (including other services along the continuum of VR services).

### **Need for Evaluation to Inform the Implementation of the Washington Transition Program.**

In the previous sections of this report, we have provided a summary of the historical contexts and continuum of VR transition services, a discussion of the ways that WA-DVR has implemented these services in the past and present, and a summary of the proposed research informed Washington Transition Program (WTP) Model

Demonstration Project that we intend to implement in 3-5 sites in 2021 & 2022. While the model that we have proposed is research and context informed, this evaluation sought to collect additional information about the current implementation of the VR service continuum within Washington to aid in project implementation. The results from this evaluation will help to fill gaps in knowledge about the implementation of the VR service continuum on a local level, and aligns with the recommendations outlined in the 2020 statewide needs assessment (Poppen & Alsalamah, 2020). The results from these activities also provide more information to WA-DVR stakeholders, and offers additional data by which the state agency can make informed decisions. The next section presents: (1) guiding evaluation questions; (2) our plan to complete an extended evaluation of stakeholder's experiences, needs, barriers, and strategies in the coordination and delivery of Pre-Employment Transition Services; (3) the results of the evaluation; and (3) a summary of findings, limitations and recommendations.

### **Guiding Evaluation Questions**

1. How do Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (WA-DVR) stakeholders describe their **current understanding** of the continuum of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services for youth and students with disabilities?
2. How do WA-DVR stakeholders describe their **experiences** in the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services?
3. What are the **current needs** of WA-DVR stakeholders when it comes to the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services?
4. What **barriers** are DVR stakeholders experiencing in the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services?
5. What **effective strategies** are DVR stakeholders using to support the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services?
6. What **recommendations** do DVR Stakeholders have to improve the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services?

7. How do DVR Stakeholders **describe their ideal service delivery system** to improve the availability, accessibility, and coordination of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services?

## **METHODS**

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### **Overview of Methods**

This evaluation utilized a qualitative research design to answer each of the seven guiding questions described above and to investigate the relationships between them. We collected evaluation data through seven 45-90 minute focus groups and three interviews with 25 key stakeholders involved in the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services and other services along the continuum of VR transition services. The stakeholder groups who participated in the focus groups and interviews included educators from rural, suburban, and urban school districts and charter schools (e.g., special educators, school psychologists, education specialists); DVR regional transition consultants; DVR contractors; and DVR counselor liaisons. To analyze the data gathered through focus groups and interviews, we conducted multiple rounds of coding, following analytic and coding procedures outlined by Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014) and Saldaña (2016).

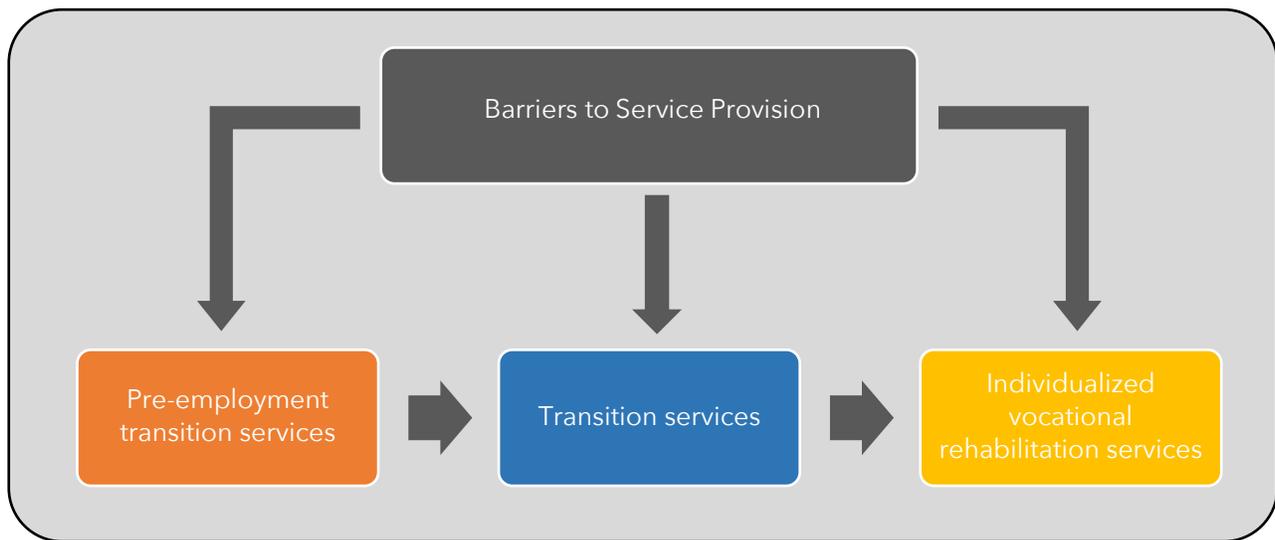
To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we utilized primary and secondary coders for all focus group and interview transcripts, reviewed other artifacts (e.g., Jamboards from discussion groups, field notes, follow up emails from stakeholders) gathered during the evaluation project to determine if they aligned with focus group and interview data sources, held regular evaluation team meetings to reach consensus on emerging themes from the data, and conducted member checks with focus group and interview participants.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This evaluation was informed by the overarching conceptual framework we developed using historical contexts, knowledge about current macro- and micro-systems influencing service delivery, and prior research. The conceptual framework considers the historical context surrounding the provision of transition-focused VR services, the continuum of services available to students and youth with disabilities,

and key features of successful transition program models. We used the conceptual framework to help identify the key factors to be explored, their perceived relationships with each other, and their impact on student outcomes. This conceptual framework also guided the identification of the key stakeholder groups needed to be able to answer our evaluation questions. Please see Figure 1 for a visual depiction of the conceptual framework.

*Figure 1*  
*Conceptual Framework*



## **Recruitment**

The evaluation utilized a purposeful sampling approach, which allowed us to bring together four homogenous groups of stakeholders so that we could learn from and compare responses between groups. Our sampling approach included reputational case selection to ensure we identified stakeholders who were knowledgeable enough about the topic to provide answers to our questions (Miles et al., 2014). Specifically, we asked key WA-DVR leaders and focus group participants to recommend others they knew who possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to transition, and we invited the recommended stakeholders to participate in the project.

The four key stakeholder groups consisted of:

- Educators (secondary special educators, education specialists, school psychologists involved in transition)
- Regional transition consultants
- Counselor liaisons
- DVR contractors providing Pre-ETS or other approved services to transition-aged students

Stakeholders were recruited through other means as well, with the concurrent goals of: (a) identifying four to seven participants for each focus group, and (b) selecting individuals who represented diverse perspectives and who possessed experience relevant to the topic. Secondary special education teachers were recruited by first contacting a list of 25 individuals who previously expressed interest during the 2020 TSAT needs assessment in talking more about their experiences with the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services. About half of the individuals on the list were teachers, and the other half were administrators. Because we were unable to identify four to seven secondary special education teachers for the focus group from this list, we expanded our recruitment efforts and the inclusion criteria. We emailed specific educators we knew from our personal professional networks who are involved in the implementation and coordination of transition services, inviting them to participate in the project, and we also included in the focus group other educational professionals outside of teachers who are involved in transition, such as school psychologists and education specialists. With these additional recruitment strategies, we successfully recruited a total of six educator participants. Due to the previously described issues with recruitment and individual participant scheduling conflicts, we held three separate focus group meetings, with two educators participating per session.

We also sought three to four regional transition consultants, four to six counselor liaisons, and four to six DVR contractors to participate in focus groups. We worked collaboratively with DVR leaders to identify potential participants who represented various regions in Washington and had a range of experiences in working with schools. To carry out recruitment, DVR supervisors provided the DVR Secondary Transition Manager with the names and contact information of regional transition consultants and counselor liaisons who they recommended for participation in the project. This information was shared with the WTP project management team, and we sent formal recruitment emails to the potential participants. With the goal of increasing counselor liaison representation within the project, DVR supervisors also sent follow-up emails to a wider range of counselor liaisons, inviting them to be a part of the focus groups. Using these recruitment strategies, we had three regional

transition consultants and seven counselor liaisons participate. The three regional transition consultants attended one single focus group session. Four of the seven counselor liaisons attended a focus group session, while the remaining three counselor liaisons took part in separate interviews, due to the expanded recruitment efforts described above and individual counselor liaison scheduling conflicts. DVR contractors were recruited by the WTP project management team based on their presence within different regions in Washington, the diversity in the services they were contracted for, and the populations of students and youth whom they served. We emailed contractors who met those criteria, inviting them to participate in the project. Nine DVR contractors were included in the program evaluation project, with six DVR contractors attending one focus group session and three DVR contractors attending a second focus group session. As an incentive to all participants, after completing their focus group or interview, we offered a limited set of professional development materials that could be used to support their work.

## **Participants**

In total, 25 stakeholders participated in the focus groups and interviews. Participants included six educators (consisting of special education teachers, educational specialists, and school psychologists), three regional transition consultants, seven counselor liaisons, and nine contractors. 20 women and five men took part in the project. 21 participants were white, and 4 participants were persons of color. Focus group attendees and interviewees also represented a variety of transition contexts throughout the state, working in rural, urban, and suburban settings. Additionally, they worked across all ESD assignments in Washington, and collectively served 25 out of 39, or approximately 64% of counties in the state. Represented counties included: Adams, Benton, Chelan, Clallam, Clark, Douglas, Grant, Grays Harbor, Island, King, Kitsap, Kittitas, Klickitat, Lewis, Okanogan, Pierce, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, Walla Walla, Whatcom, and Yakima counties, and two statewide organizations who work in contract with Washington DVR. We were unable to achieve representation in the focus groups or interviews for Asotin, Columbia, Cowlitz, Ferry, Garfield, Jefferson, Lincoln, Mason, Pacific, Pend Oreille, Skamania, Stevens, and Wahkiakum counties. Please see Table 1 for participant information on the various stakeholder focus groups/interviews.

Table 1  
Focus Group/Interview Stakeholder Information

<b>Stakeholder Group</b>	<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Region</b>
Educators ( <i>n</i> = 6); 3 focus group sessions were held with 2 participants each	5 women, 1 man; 6 participants were white	Southwest, South Central, Puget Sound, and Eastern regions
Regional Transition Consultants ( <i>n</i> = 3); 1 focus group session was held with 3 participants	2 women, 1 man; 3 participants were white	Southwest, North Central, South Central, and Northern regions
Counselor Liaisons ( <i>n</i> = 7); 1 focus group session was held with 4 participants; 3 interviews were held with 3 participants	7 women; 1 participant was a person of color; 6 participants were white	South Central, Southwest, Puget Sound, and Northwest regions
DVR Contractors ( <i>n</i> = 9); 1 focus group session was held with 6 participants; a second focus group session was held with 3 participants	6 women, 3 men; 3 participants were persons of color; 6 participants were white	East, North Central, Northwest, West, North, Puget Sound, and two statewide organizations

## Procedures

The focus groups and interviews followed a semi-structured approach, using a standard protocol for all stakeholder groups. The questions on the protocol asked participants to describe their professional backgrounds, discuss their knowledge of VR's responsibilities to students with disabilities, describe the relationship between VR and schools, identify challenges and barriers to effective service coordination, share strategies that have facilitated effective service coordination, and discuss steps that would need to be taken to improve services for students with disabilities. The protocol was reviewed by transition professionals and experts for content accuracy and coherence. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the protocol used in the evaluation project.

The focus groups and interviews were held virtually using the Zoom videoconferencing platform between February and June 2020. A member of the WTP project management team facilitated each of the focus group and interview sessions,

and the majority of sessions were attended by one or more additional members of the project management team. The focus group/interview facilitator periodically asked follow-up questions to clarify points being made, to seek elaboration on important ideas, or to encourage participation from different members of the group. All focus group and interview sessions were video recorded and later transcribed by a WSU doctoral student skilled in qualitative research methods, and a contracted transcription service used by the WTP project management team. The transcribed data were uploaded to the qualitative analysis software *N\*Vivo* for later analysis. In addition to the transcriptions and recordings, detailed notes were taken during each of the focus group/interview sessions by the facilitator or another member of the project management team. Google Jam Boards were also created for several focus group sessions to visually document key ideas that emerged. Two debriefing meetings were held by the WTP project management team during this period to discuss initial impressions and emerging ideas around focus group and interviewee responses. Several stakeholders also sent follow up emails after the focus group sessions ended to provide additional information to the project management team.

All data (including video recordings, transcriptions, notes, and other artifacts) were stored using the security protocols detailed in Section 6 and Exhibit A of the contract and were treated as confidential information. Only authorized project staff have access to view the information, and data are stored on a secure cloud-based server at Washington State University that complies with requirements in Exhibit A, section (5) of the contract. To further protect participant confidentiality and minimize potentially identifiable information, some personal stakeholder details (e.g., names of specific schools or locations within Washington) have been omitted throughout the report.

## **Data Analysis**

We adopted an inductive approach to data analysis in order to identify common patterns and themes among the different experiences and perspectives reported by participants (Miles et al., 2014). To help ensure that emergent patterns and themes accurately reflected the data, we used a multi-cycle coding procedure. Prior to the start of coding, the coding team (consisting of WTP project management team members and the WSU doctoral student research assistant) pilot coded the first transcript together and developed a codebook that was used for coding all subsequent transcripts. During the *first cycle of coding*, all transcripts were coded separately by two researchers using line-by-line descriptive and in vivo coding strategies (Saldaña, 2016). In the *second cycle of coding*, researchers worked collaboratively in pairs using pattern coding and cross-case analyses across

stakeholder groups to cluster first level codes into categories and develop initial themes and constructs (Saldaña, 2016). After the second cycle of coding was completed, the coding team met as a whole group. During this meeting, the team used visual representations to investigate and depict relationships between themes (i.e., axial coding) and reviewed transcripts' text and first and second level codes to ensure fit within and between themes (Saldaña, 2016). Disagreements about the inclusion or exclusion of specific themes and sub-themes and the relationships between themes were resolved by reviewing transcripts' text, first and second level codes, and reaching consensus among team members.

### **Trustworthiness of Results**

We took several recommended steps to enhance the trustworthiness of the results of this project (Brantlinger et al., 2005). First, we reviewed researcher notes, the Google Jamboard visual representations, and follow-up emails from participants as we developed the themes and subthemes to check for theme consistency across multiple data sources. Second, all transcripts were double coded by two researchers, and the evaluation team worked collaboratively to develop themes and subthemes. Any disagreements in the coding process were resolved by reviewing the data and coming to consensus as a team. Finally, we employed second level member checks to gain stakeholder feedback on the validity of our final coding taxonomy (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Specifically, we emailed stakeholders a summary of the qualitative evaluation results and asked them to tell us whether or not they agreed with the findings, and if they did not agree, to discuss how the findings differed from their own lived experiences. None of participants reported any concerns or issues with the summaries that were shared with them.

## **RESULTS**

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The results from our qualitative analyses revealed five themes in response to our guiding questions: (1) What's happening now; (2) Strengths and strategies; (3) Barriers; (4) Values and beliefs; and (5) Recommendations for the future. This section will introduce each of these five themes and provide specific examples of how participants' responses represented these themes.

During the interviews and focus groups, the 25 participants were thoughtful and deliberate in their responses to our questions. In an effort to capture their intent, readers of this report will notice we have used several longer quotations to help

provide story and context. In our results, we have emphasized the responses we received from teachers, whose impressions about strategies and barriers to coordinated service delivery are critical in achieving the accessibility goals of WIOA, and those of regional transition consultants who coordinate and deliver those services. We also provide examples of statements from DVR High School Counselor Liaisons and DVR Contractors. Readers are encouraged to immerse themselves within the quotations to see the story that is told throughout these results.

## **What's Happening Now**

The “what’s happening now” theme describes the current state of school and VR collaboration and service delivery in Washington state. Within this theme, participants from each of the four stakeholder groups (educators, regional transition consultants, high school counselor liaisons, and DVR contractors) reported a shared importance of “the work” and how much of what they did was “for the students.” Collaboration was another sub-theme as participants talked about the different ways in which they worked together. While some participants highlighted innovative collaborative practices, others discussed inconsistencies in service delivery and disconnectedness between schools and VR offices. Examples of these sub-themes are shared below.

***Shared importance of “the work”.*** Across each of the four stakeholder groups, participants described a shared importance of the work that they were doing to coordinate and deliver transition services to youth and young adults with disabilities. One educator reported, *“Everyone wants the same thing for these kids, it's just how do we get there”*, and another said:

*“I want to offer my-my students as much community connections as they can get, and so, um, you know although, I-I do similar things with my students, it's nice for them to be hearing from somebody that's not me”* (Educator).

A Regional Transition Consultant also talked about the importance of this work, and stated:

*“We all want students to progress through this situation at the highest levels, to be able to meet, um, others’ expectations as well as their own. Um, and we all want them to be to be successful, and sometimes we're going to have to just play along regardless of whether that's happening right now”* (Regional Transition Consultant).

When referring to the importance of this work, a DVR Contractor said:

*"...why we have our contract is because we can offer that work experience and job site training, to give students a kind of a look into what employment, um, is and what some of the challenges that they're going to experience with their disability within that setting" (DVR Contractor).*

**Collaboration.** Collaboration was another sub-theme within participants' descriptions of what's happening now. Regional Transition Consultants and Vocational Rehabilitation counselors described the many ways they are working to build strong and collaborative relationships with school staff under difficult contexts, including how they are trying to communicate the benefits of coordinated services. One Regional Transition Consultant said:

*"I'm really trying to develop a relationship with...many educators and schools out there to, um, just to help bridge that gap, I think there's a lot of pressure on teachers to... especially those who, you know, have a lot of students who are leaving school, to really make sure that those transition services are in place, and that they have, they're stepping out of school and they're stepping into adult life, in a way where they know what's next. And it's, it's very difficult, the systems need to catch up, so that, that seamless transition can happen" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

In a similar vein, another Regional Transition Consultant said:

*"Those [schools] that I have connected with, I think, are excited about the prospect of having some additional support for their students. And I think those will be very strong relationships" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

Educators also had a lot to share about their current efforts and desires to build collaborative relationships with their partners at Vocational Rehabilitation. These educators talked about the various roles of people they were collaborating with and the benefits that these collaborative efforts have on their students. One educator reported the strong partnership that was formed, but also discussed some of the challenges brought on by the covid-19 pandemic:

*"About this time last year I met with a [Regional Transition Consultant] that was just hired, um, her name was [Name], um and she has been, she's-she seems very on top of things, she has been um, I mean she was already set to provide*

*like, in class instruction and things for kids this fall, but then with COVID she's been doing, um some, she sends out stuff constantly about seminars and things" (Educator).*

Some educators used their hands to visually represent their collaborative partnerships, while saying:

*"So, as far as the current relationship with DVR. Um, the interaction has been very positive, with our pre-employment services person. And [they] seems very open and receptive, with.. it's like we're here [raises one hand], [they're] here [raises other hand], and it's just [begins to bring two hands together] -- we need to make that connection, we need to bring things together" (Educator).*

Another educator shared their plans for building a transition program or curriculum in their own school, and how their DVR partnerships were going to be a "huge asset" in those activities:

*"Um, right now I have a great resource that.. provides like a visual tour of what it means to be in a job, or just like for kids to experience, um, a job-type situation that they might be interested in, and give a lot of stepping stones to provide for that, and internships, down the road, that's what I'm trying to develop, a modified curriculum right now is really challenging for-from some of my folks in my school district, because we don't have a program, so I'm trying to develop it. And DVR is going to be a huge asset in those internships, and experience-- hands on experiences" (Educator).*

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, it was very clear that participants were working very hard to build positive relationships with one other. This included the partnerships between vendors and staff at vocational rehabilitation.

**Disconnectedness and Lack of Follow Through.** As participants were describing the current state of coordination between schools and Vocational Rehabilitation, a theme of disconnectedness and a lack of follow through also emerged. This occurred within the contexts of Covid-19 and the continued statewide efforts to expand the delivery of pre-employment transition services from where they were several years prior. Different stakeholders described this disconnection differently, but it was something that emerged from *all* 25 participants. Some discussed concerns about internal team friction, and others focused more on the disconnect and lack of follow through between teams.

Regional Transition Consultants and High School Counselor Liaisons talked extensively about the disconnect *within* DVR and one reported *"I think systemically, we're really falling short in really meeting the obligations with the school..."* (Regional Transition Consultant), which was followed up with by another *"We don't have a cohesive... within team that is working towards a common goal. We're actually, there is the, the friction within, I think it's becoming the greatest barrier for us to be effective in the work that we're doing"* (Regional Transition Consultant). Another reported:

*"I was just in a meeting last week, um, that another, um, another RTC and myself were invited to go to...and it was with our supervisors and the topic of Pre-ETS came up, and... it just like opened a huge door, that people were really complaining about, how counselors don't understand Pre-ETS, and so they can't really explain it to the people who ask them questions, if they're going to IEPs or if they're going to meetings they don't really understand it. So, they don't understand it, so nothing really happens with it, and so there's... [sighs] there's just this kind of disconnection between how really, it feels like people within the agency don't... don't understand it, but then it's like, people know they don't understand, and there's not enough effort made to bridge that gap, to help us to move forward as a group"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And:

*"I don't know if it the state is making those rules but there's definitely a disconnect in how we may serve the students and schools get very, very, frustrated, and confused"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

Some DVR staff also discussed the disconnect between schools:

*"I know the district that I worked in, um, the, the executive director of special education, made it pretty clear that he was not really excited about DVR, because there had been so many starts and stops, and he really, was actively trying to make things work but kind of pu-pulled back and I wouldn't say they gave up, but really, I could tell that...[their] kind of thinking process about it was is that it wasn't as credible....let's just put it that way"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And:

*"Sometimes I kind of feel like I'm spinning my wheels a little bit with that, but I have engaged with some schools and there are, there are beginnings of some really good things that are going on, um, and we have one contractor in all of the ESD that's here in [City]... Um and I have to say, that DVR doesn't have a very good relationship with them so I don't know how long that's going to last"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And:

*"[when I started my job] I didn't even know what students had enrolled in who were Pre-ETS students. I mean, I didn't even really know how to go find out who they were, or what schools were involved, and I just sort of, you know, dug around and found some of that information out, and reconnected with some of those, um, reconnected with some of those schools"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

Several Educators discussed their frustrations with the poor connections that they felt towards Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff, and the limited opportunities that they had to interact. For example, one educator said:

*"It's like we're doing this [raises two hands with fingers all spread apart], and if the systems connect even at this one point [touches one pinky finger to one pointer finger on other hand, just touching 2 out of 10 fingers together], I'd be thrilled. But right now we're kind of like, [disconnects two fingers to show two totally separate "hand" systems], ahh"* (Educator).

And,

*"...there's-there's a DVR person that's assigned to our school but I know that person's assigned to many schools, and so it's uh, we see that person very, very limited, um, amount of time"* (Educator).

And,

*"Um, I know last year was a little murky. Um, I don't even think I was, got an email from, I'm not even sure who our, who our [contact] is in [our] County, right now, um"* (Educator).

**Service Details.** As participants described what was going on in their areas, a lot of really good examples emerged of how services were being delivered and coordinated. These responses communicated participants' understanding about the intentions of WIOA and the continuum of vocational rehabilitation services, as well as the specific ways that they were translating this understanding into practice. To put it simply, this is where the rubber hits the road, and impactful services are delivered to students who need them.

To begin, here is how one regional transition consultant described Vocational Rehabilitation's obligation to ensure the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities:

*"DVR is required to provide pre employment transition services, in five areas: post secondary counseling, workplace readiness training ,work based learning, self advocacy... aaaand... I always miss one... um... job exploration, was the fifth one"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

Now some examples of the ways educators have perceived and experienced the delivery and coordination of services:

*"So, um, I think it's spotty, in my, my area. Um, I know they've like offered to do presentations, videos, um, interviews... but... [shrugs and throws her hands up]. That's my experience."* (Special Education Teacher)

Another educator described services as:

*"There were Zoom classes that were offered to our students. And since there was a lot of asynchronous time for our students, um, when I heard about these I was able to, um, give this information to my students, um, in my older social group, and they-they were able to go get into some of those Zoom classes...So that worked well for a while and then they stopped doing the Zoom classes, I wanna say it was November sometime or near the end of Octo-November, um. And uh, the DVR transition person...I've been speaking with [them] most of this year and um, [they] was telling me about a program, a curriculum that uh, I believe was new, and [they] had the opportunity to um, kind of test it out or whatever, um with classes, and so [they're] doing that, we just started, um last week. And so [they're] coming to my class, via Zoom, um once a week."* (Special Education Teacher)

And, noting turnover,

*"They have not physically come to my school building, but they have pushed into my virtual school setting, and so ways that look like is... I have a group with my uh, mod-to-severe students who received, um, DVR services through this individual, and we would go through, um internship, and like, job readiness courses, um, over Zoom and do some exercises. She would send me the PowerPoints beforehand, um, and say "hey does this make sense" and I would give some feedback as to like what level, reading wise, and just like access points that would be helpful for my guys, um, and I was with her for once a week, she met with us for 45 minutes, uh, and that was all through this past year, so this she's already with us...But now she's on leave." (Special Education Teacher)*

Generally speaking focus group and interview participants had a difficult time articulating the rules and regulations regarding Vocational Rehabilitation's obligations. Regional transition consultants did this best, and were also able to provide some good examples of how these obligations are being met. For example:

*"Um, [laughs] and so the five areas DVR is required, what that looks like, is different in every area, and, and that's um, really depends on the contractor, the need of the school, and what is happening within the school system. And so what it looks like in, in my region [labels removed] is probably something completely different than what it looks like in [other] region, um, because the contractors, and because of, um, those factors" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"Um, so as far as what's happening in my area, um, I'm the one person in the ESD right now [laughs]. And it's a pretty large area [emphasizing the LARGE in this area]. Um, I'm feeling pretty good about just being [laughs] where I'm at right now, which is contacting schools, trying to kind of push through and see who knows something about Pre-ETS, and who is interested in learning more, given a time when teachers are just, I'm sorry for lack of a better word, they're just slammed right now" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"We... um, are tracking, we're finally tracking the amount of students that we serve. So we served [XXX] students for the month of January, so we're starting to track the amount of students that we serve. Basically, we have a contractor, we have [X] contractors, that provide services in school during the school day. And so what that looks like, is either during, uh, an elective time or integrated with a classroom time, a contractor or myself will come in and deliver a workshop, usually in job exploration or workplace readiness training, because those two areas are kind of the higher need with some of the schools that I'm working with. And the workshop is basically anywhere from... it's a class period so, you know that's anywhere from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. To, er, uh, 50 minutes, and it's via zoom. Everything is remote. Um, [laughs] and that's part of the challenge, too, is, uh, trying to provide remote services has been... challenging, to say the least the school year, um, to say the least" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"I came on board in [2020], at that point, uh, my entire region was only serving a handful of students that I can count on my 10 fingers, which is pretty-pretty concerning, we have, um in, in my--just the ESD [omitted], we have a potentially [more than 2,000] students that could qualify for Pre-ETS services with a documented disability, [more than 2,000] students and we're serving less than 10 " (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"So, what we did as a team in Region [X] to kind of uh offset, a little bit of those numbers and trying to get on board with outreach and kind of get in with the schools. We begin offering a virtual workshops which went really well, was very well received. So, um, we offer one workshop a week, we started in October and went all the way through December, and we made that workshop available to all of the schools in our region. Um, and, uh, and provided them with the link so was, that was a good way to kind of open up that door and then we provided all five areas of Pre-ETS through those workshops in topics. So we would engage the students, um, in various topics and doing icebreakers and kind of get them, their minds going, and use that as a means to introduce Pre-ETS across our region, um, to kind of give the educators, a little bit of an idea and a taste of what Pre-ETS is about" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

Participants shared several examples of what services to students looked like, and some of the various approaches and types of services that were provided. It was encouraging to hear participants talk about how their new relationships and existing relationships was a core element in the successful delivery of these services.

Shared importance, collaboration, and service details were the three sub-themes that emerged as participants described their current efforts to engage in school and vocational rehabilitation collaborative partnerships.

### **Strengths and strategies**

The next theme (not sub-theme) that emerged throughout the data was strengths and strategies. Stakeholders across Washington all shared moments of optimism during their focus groups and interviews. Through this optimism they described a broad range of strategies they used to provide coordinated services to students with disabilities. Two of the key strategies and/or strengths to Pre-ETS provision were: (1) personalized approaches to making contact and building relationships between schools and VR staff, and (2) flexibility and innovation in starting services (e.g., planning transition activities before the school year starts, focusing on specific student populations, summer programming). Multiple stakeholders also described how providing services virtually enhanced access to Pre-ETS for students during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We have represented these concepts through seven sub-themes that are presented below.

***Establishing connections.*** The first of the sub-themes related to strengths and strategies for coordinated transition service delivery was establishing connections. Educators discussed their appreciation for the work completed by their newly introduced Regional Transition Consultants. For example, one special education teacher reported:

*"I really appreciated um, [RTCs Name] this year, 'cause it-it, she communicates, um you know sends out information, is making those connections um, with-with my students, you know she's able to call them by name, um, you know all those things. So just, it-it makes them more comfortable um..." (Educator).*

And another,

*"But, last spring ... last fall, maybe or winter... um... [RTCs Name], who is our pre-employment DVR person, came, gave a presentation to one of my high*

*schools, to the special ed staff, it was great. And [they] explained the push from the state, to provide the pre-employment services. And I know that [they've] had contact with the other high schools, so that my understanding is that there is a big push with the state to do this, which I'm thrilled about"* (Educator).

Regional Transition Consultants discussed the importance of building and maintaining connections with the right stakeholders, and working with those stakeholders to identify and address their needs:

*"So I would say that my relationship with the schools, is, is, is really good right now, um, I'm very optimistic, I'm getting a lot of responses. I serve XX schools. Uh, I've been able to reach half of them right now, and reintroduce"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And,

*"I think what's, what's worked, um [clicks tongue] has been finding the right stakeholders at the school. Um... And you, you really want to find a teacher who is kind of the power teacher, the power player, out at the school, who's passionate about serving students with disabilities, um, and who the other teachers lean on for their questions. Um... And that person looks different at every school"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

*"I allow the school districts to talk about what the challenges that they've had, as a strategy, to open up a door to say how can we move forward in a way that is more positive so that we can all partner and provide services to the students. Um, and assuring the schools that we're not here to... add more work to educators"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And, a comment about establishing connections from the perspective of a DVR Contractor,

*"but having relationships with the teachers to where they say, "Sure, yeah, we want you to come in and do it during this time." Um, and it's not supplanting anything we're doing then great. Uh, and that's, that's been helpful"* (DVR Contractor).

**Partnerships and collaboration.** In a related, but distinct sub-theme, participants also discussed the various ways their partnerships and collaborations were a strength

and strategy in their work. One educator talked about the value that these partnerships bring to students who may seek additional services from Vocational Rehabilitation after high school, by saying: *“This is, I’m just being honest. One of the biggest appeals of pre-employment services, is that the kid will have a foot in the door.”* (Educator).

Regional Transition Consultants brought a different perspective on partnerships and collaboration, highlighting the way they’ve seen these partnerships lead to stronger service delivery systems and improved outcomes for youth.

*“So, my strategy has been to partner, my efforts to school and with schools, with the transition liaisons, with the VRCs”* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And,

*“I have seen a lot of positive outcomes since we've had a full team, even across the state with the amount of outreach and, and how much we've been able to do in such a short given time that we've had with little training and all of those”* (Regional Transition Consultant).

Similarly, contractors also talked about the importance of partnership and collaboration in their work. One contractor talked about how helpful it was to have a regularly scheduled meeting with other contractors throughout the state, which helped them get ideas and information:

*“[Statewide Transition Manager] has just started doing some monthly check-ins with us too, and that's been really helpful. Um, and then also the lunch and learns that [Name] has been hosting where all the different, uh, pre-ETS contractors come on and share some information about the program. I really like those. I find those really valuable”* (DVR Contractor).

**Flexibility and innovation.** Participants also discussed the ways both flexibility and innovation were key strengths and strategies for successful coordination between school and vocational rehabilitation. One educator described the ingenuity of the regional transition consultant with whom they worked in the following way:

*“We have an exc -- again. An excellent VR counselor who believes in working with youth and, and, the importance of that, and, um, will come as many times as I need [them] to, to the school, and if, you know, [their] schedule allows, and*

*provides me with information about different, you know, happenings and, and, things, I wish there were more of her. Um, so if there's, you know, if there's a loophole to find, this, this [person] will."* - Educator

And, as a facilitator reflected from a different conversation with educators:

*"So, this is a new way of conceptualizing, and then figuring out how do we individualize and give students the support that they need, how to make that work for students who are, you know, booked from the time they get into school to the time they get out, and then there's extra stuff after school, just to keep them moving towards that academic trajectory, right, so... It's re-envisioning and reimagining...who these services are for, and then getting people what they need, and figuring out how to do that, so yeah."* - Facilitator Reflection

**Starting small.** Another sub-theme that emerged within the strengths and strategies was starting small. Participants seemed to generally recognize the grand scope of VR's obligation to ensure the coordination of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students who need them, and in several instances, discussed how starting small is one of the ways they feel like they are building the momentum to meet these intentions successfully. A couple of quotations that highlight this sub-theme include:

*"But I think it's, again, not, not over promising, just, just delivering what you say that you're going to do"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And,

*"When people are able to do it... It's like I try to, you know, give them something that's value added like something that's going to be coming soon so, just know that there is, Pre-ETS is here, we're here to serve as a need which your students most likely have"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

**Advanced planning.** Another strength and strategy that emerged from the findings is the importance of advanced planning to be able to deliver services. Educators and VR staff brought this up as a strategy for building momentum in their partnerships together, for example:

*"I feel like I kind of have to, in advance, sort of tell school districts is like, "hey there's this cool thing that's going on that I, you know, think you guys would*

*might really like to be a part of... "But I think it's, again, not, not over promising, just, just delivering what you say that you're going to do" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

Vendors also discussed the importance of advanced planning and its impact on delivering services to students:

*"So just having a game, uh, that kind of game plan and getting everything set up, uh, as a year's ending and having meetings the first week of school kind of thing, right? Or, or very close to it, uh, or even beforehand with, you know, some, some of the administration. So, um, you know, we tell them our plan and we, we, we kind of tell the bells and whistles or whatever, like here are all the things that we can do for the students if we engage in this plan and kind of having some buy-in, um, as a school ends and before it begins, uh, it has been helpful for that continued growth" (DVR Vendor).*

**Summer programming.** Summer programming was also a strategy for service delivery that was mentioned by Regional Transition Consultants and DVR Contractors.

*"We, we really advocate and, and believe in summer programming. It helps kids stay connected and reduces recidivism and, and, um, you can do things a little bit differently than maybe during the school year. Um, but then we, so we didn't have to do a ton of coordination and, uh, with, with the summer program, because they're not in school" (DVR Contractor).*

And,

*"Work based learning is pretty much a need across the board, with most schools... it usually happens during the summer .... We usually try and build services through scaffolding to, to summer, um, and to get the kids prepped for the summer" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

**Working virtually.** Lastly, working virtually actually emerged as a strength and a strategy. Several participants from each stakeholder group (educators, regional transition consultants, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and contractors) mentioned that while Covid-19 has undoubtedly had its challenges, the normalization of virtual instruction and services had increased the breadth and reach of individualized and group services. Providing remote services allowed providers to offer a workshop to one school on one side of a region in the morning, and another

school on another side of the region shortly thereafter. As one Regional Transition Consultant said:

*"We began offering a virtual workshops which went really well, was very well received. So, um, we offer one workshop a week, we started in October and went all the way through December, and we made that workshop available to all of the schools in our region. Um, and, uh, and provided them with the link so was, that was a good way to kind of open up that door and then we provided all five areas of Pre-ETS through those workshops in topics. So we would engage the students, um, in various topics and doing icebreakers and kind of get them, their minds going, and use that as a means to introduce Pre-ETS across our region, um, to kind of give the educators, a little bit of an idea and a taste of what Pre-ETS is about" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

## **Barriers**

Despite the strengths and strategies reported above, stakeholders also described barriers they encountered in the implementation of pre-employment transition services. Participants across groups described the challenges in what we've called "doing the work", which represents the actual practice of delivering services to students, including specific policies and procedures related to gaining access to students and completing consent paperwork. Participants also described barriers that included their own lack of knowledge about the Vocational Rehabilitation continuum of services, and role-related roles and responsibilities. There was also variability in developing and sustaining relationships between school and VR staff, with one factor being staff turnover.

**Doing "the work"**. A common barrier to successful collaboration and coordination between school and local VR agencies was getting things done. We have called this sub-theme "doing the work" and it includes the absence of practices and products that should be a result of collaboration. Stakeholders discussed whether or not it was feasible for someone who is in one of the handful of Regional Transition Consultant positions to successfully ensure the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to all potentially eligible students with disabilities in their region. Stakeholders also discussed the logistical issues of who within the collaboration is taking the lead, scheduling workshops, and delivering services to students.

Special education teachers had a lot to say about the challenges associated with coordinating services with Vocational Rehabilitation. One educator put it bluntly:

*"The last thing that teachers need is one more thing, like DVR, to have to take the initiative on. So what would be great, to overcome as a barrier, is if the DVR person contacted the teacher, and said what day works for you, I'm going to come." (Educator)*

And,

*"Uh... So, it's, it, the system we have for secondary special education services is disjointed, and poor DVR kind of coming in and thinking, Oh, we'll just work with the kids, would--they'll, they like that, sort of career stuff, we'll just take them and do a... job training thing. [Laughs]." (Educator).*

And,

*"...there's--there's a DVR person that's assigned to our school but I know that person's assigned to many schools, and so it's uh, we see that person very, very limited, um, amount of time." - Special Education Teacher*

And,

*"This year, has-has not been good, you know and I'm sure it's due to, due to COVID, um. And [they're] used to come into my classroom, um, a couple years ago [they] came pretty much monthly, to one of my classes, and that was awesome, um, I had my students fill out the DVR, the actual DVR application which is several pages long, um, and then when [they] would come in monthly, if a, if a parent wanted to come in at that time, then they would come into my classroom too, um, but again it-it was very difficult to follow what that student and the parents and I, and what I needed to do. I-it-it just, it's-it's just confusing. And so that was one year, but it felt like I was making some headway or I was doing something and then like I said then, the-it was totally different, then [they] couldn't come anymore because [they] got assigned more schools or something, I don't know um" -- Special Education Teacher*

And,

*"A lot still remains to be seen, and between my three high schools it's been really variable. Um... Some have already had pre-employment service groups..... Some got nothing. You know, it feels like, once that presentation*

*happens with pre-employment services, the IEP teacher really has to take, you know, the bull by the horns, and make something happen.” (Educator).*

A DVR Contractor also offered some interesting insight into the challenges in “doing the work” and talked about their empathy towards the Regional Transition Consultant role, and questioning whether or not DVR have enough staff on the ground to do the work that they need to:

*“My impression of, of DVR is that perhaps their caseload is too heavy to, the caseload and the amount of ground they have to cover is, is too expansive to, to do well... Are they willing to really commit the people, people power? I mean, in order, in order to collaborate, in order to, to connect, uh, I think we really need the bodies, um, to do that with, and I just don't have the impression that we're getting that kind of coverage... Um, it's not that they're not trying, uh, they just have a lot of ground to cover and you can't do it all. So my vote would be for more bodies” (DVR Contractor).*

Another DVR Contractor talked about how they felt there were barriers to gaining access to students in order to deliver services, and how the contexts that they were providing services in always seemed to be changing:

*“It feels like we're doing a lot of the legwork when it comes to recruiting and outreaching, um, the emp- when we ask certain questions to get some clarities, we get mixed messages. There's never a, a definite answer. Um, each time we meet, um, there's something new that they want us to, uh, follow there's a new policy or procedure that they want us to follow. Um, yeah, that's one of the biggest challenges we're facing right now. And there's not a lot of room for flexibility, which we were hoping to get” (DVR Contractor).*

Regional Transition Consultants also talked about barriers in “doing the work”:

*“if I'm going out to school and I'm talking about Pre-ETS and almost feeling like a salesperson sometimes, like I'm trying to sell somebody on something that it's like, I don't know if this is the right thing [laughs] that I'm supposed to be doing or not, but I'm trying to sell them on something and kind of convincing them to do it, but then there might be somebody else, who shows up from DVR, who doesn't know anything about it, or maybe doesn't say things about it that are all that positive, or just because they don't know something that kind of makes it negative, if you know what I mean” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"But then nobody's doing it, like, nobody's doing anything to change it, they just talk about it and at that same meeting they talked about how they were so annoyed that they've just got... they've been talking about this for a really long time and nothing's happened. Well it's like, well who's going to do something then?! It's like, who's supposed to be doing, why are we having these meetings if there is no action plan?"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And,

*"When I was a teacher, it just... going back and forth between being in a classroom and being virtual is something that is almost unimaginable in difficulty, especially with special education students. I think that it's hi-highly misunderstood, to think that, that is something that... just people just turn like a light bulb on and off. It's not, when you've been teaching students in a classroom, face to face, and doing and doing... um.. [clicks tongue] having interactions and being able to put activities together with people being together, it's very different than being virtual or you don't even control if they um, come to the screen or not, or if they even have a screen to go to, or if they have internet service, or if mom or dad is there, or... you know, if they understand it, there's just like so many barriers to doing that that I feel like it's really tough to be asking educators to take on a lot of new stuff."* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And,

*"Our first contractor, [stammers] came on board in February of 2020, right when COVID hit. So, we were faced with a great challenge of not only there was the only first contractor that we've have ever had, that was a local contractor, that you know schools were shut down. And so that really became the detriment for services"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

**Inconsistency and Poor Follow Through.** Another barrier that participants discussed, particularly educators and vendors, was a pattern of inconsistency and poor follow through from Vocational Rehabilitation staff:

*"Um, when I first got my position I knew I wanted D-- as soon as I saw my caseload, that I wanted DVR, it took a while, I would say, almost six months for me to like, have a person, and I know the name, I have a direct contact with that person. Um, it took a while for me to get that point, and a lot of emails, and a lot of back and forth, so it just isn't a new thing, this is, this assistance thing, [laughs] obviously" (Educator).*

And,

*"They just did not have the, um, feeling that it was their role to participate in school district, uh, outreach" (Educator).*

And,

*"I feel like I have, um, one gentleman that I could probably reach out to, but he's not real reliable on getting back to me in a timely fashion" (Educator).*

And,

*"Um, I shouldn't have to work that hard. Um.. So, I guess. Uh.. It's been so inconsistent with personnel, and I understand that. Um.. So I think it's just a part. They need to figure that out, [scoffs] in their department. So, it's, I don't know, consistency?" (Educator).*

And,

*"Um, I feel like, about three years ago, we did have a gal come into our school, she brought these beautiful folders for us, um, full of information, and, um, they should be coming in at the age of six-- like pretty much as freshmen. Um, they, we should be connecting these, um, the, the agencies with our students. That has not happened" (Special Education Teacher).*

And, one contractor described similar challenges with follow through:

*"I think, just to where we left off, like the regional transition consultants, it's, it's been a little bit challenging working with them. Um, specifically I can say that it feels like we're the ones that are kind of like running around and going to the schools, going to the teachers and then we come back to our regional transition consultant and it's like, oh, you guys didn't do this. And you didn't send in the*

*consent form on time and you didn't. So there's a lot of like, it feels like it's, you're, well, like kind of being micromanaged a little bit and, and, and it creates more barriers rather than being more of there to be a support system. It just sometimes feel like we're, we're the... It's only one-sided" (DVR Contractor).*

Regional Transition Consultants also seemed to recognize inconsistency and follow through as a barrier:

*"We need to seem credible with the schools, we have to be consistent. We have to be respectful of their rules and their guidelines. We can't impose all of our bureaucracy upon them, we need to look at these and try to break those down a little bit to the best of our ability" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

**Policy and procedures.** Policies and procedures for coordinating and delivering pre-employment transition services were also reported frequently as a barrier in and of themselves. These policies and procedures including the historical role out of services required by WIOA of 2014, changes and modifications to those procedures, the absence of an instructional manual for how to deliver services, and the Transition Services Assessment Tool (TSAT). As one educator described:

*"The challenges, um, mostly have come, even with the first iteration of, uh, rolling out, WIOA services, was this lack of understanding about how a high school works. Um... This good intention from, from VR lead, state wise or, or federal, that you can -- someone can just roll into a school and do career stuff....We just don't have the structure, for, for any of it" (Educator).*

And,

*"We kind of had a false start with Pre-ETS, you know, we, we started DVR started with Pre-ETS and then it kind of... you know... was reimaged, and we're trying to, in some cases, repair our relationship with the schools because of that false start" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"... there has been a lot of damage that has occurred with schools in terms of Pre-ETS. Pre-ETS did not start well in 2014 as we all know, there were revisions. There was then the order of selection, so DVR can meet its obligation financially" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*"Well I think, part of the challenge is, um, we haven't really gotten an instruction manual on how to deliver Pre-ETS to the school, [laughs] it's kind of been in each region. The vision, there hasn't really been a statewide vision, as to how to get Pre-ETS out at each individual area, and maybe that is part of, you know, because Washington is so geographically [stammers] diverse, but, um I feel like part of it also is a-a challenge, where I feel like DVR could be doing better"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

And,

*"I also think some of the barriers are, um, are around the needs of the schools. Um.. You know, we had our needs assessment that we did with that, that TSAT. And I-I think that has been in some ways created barriers, with some schools. It was unclear whether or not schools needed to complete the TSAT in order to receive Pre-ETS. And, so, that has kind of been unclear"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

Policy and procedure barriers were also described from the perspectives of a couple of teachers:

*"I feel like every year is kind of like, 'Oh there's DVR in,' and it just um, it takes so much time to figure out or understand, um, what they can offer um, and so it just seems like a lot of time goes by before understanding"* (Educator).

And,

*"the foundation of my, my schooling was in [U.S. State], and [U.S. State] -- at least, at the time in the 90s -- had VR counselors in the school district.... So, the idea when we moved out here, that it was just so separate, and there's not even really recognized CRCs out here. Um, there's not preparation programs, and-and that was like the just beginning, um, qualification that you needed to do, to work with, uh, young adults, or adults with disabilities, so, um, that, that has thrown me"* (Educator).

A final thought on policy and procedure related barriers from a regional transition consultant:

*"So, I will say that I have been DVR's greatest cheerleader and their greatest critic. I had my first conversation about Pre-ETS and, and, uh, WIOA in 2014 when it got signed in, and uh, the director in my region basically um, said we can't provide any of these services I don't care what the federal government says, he's no longer here, obviously, so I can say that"* (Regional Transition Consultant).

**Professional skills and knowledge.** Another barrier that was reported by participants was a lack of professional skills and knowledge about how schools and vocational rehabilitation agencies can collaborate together, and what people's roles and responsibilities are in coordinating and delivering services.

Educators were particularly limited in their knowledge about the continuum of Vocational Rehabilitation services, who to contact, when to contact them, and how to connect their students to services. As one teacher put it:

*"Um, you know, and I'm just going to be very honest in this... I, my knowledge is very limited"* (Special Education Teacher).

Another reported:

*"What I know is that there's some services that they [DVR] can provide during high school, while students are still enrolled in high school. Um, there was I think, there was some legislation that passed a few years ago that said they [DVR] were supposed to take... 10 percent of their budget was set aside to provide I think, high s... activities within high schools"* (Educator).

And,

*"I would say the obligation isn't clear, necessarily, to the school, I would say, my mindset was like they're only for kids who are... And this isn't true, but, for severe, um, IEPs and severe eligibilities, but that's not the case, it's any student with an IEP or 504. So that is a wide range of, um, access that I was not aware of"* (Educator).

And,

*"Um, I do know that they support students who are on 504s, um, err--that SLD, I mean, all, all levels of, um, disabilities but it's, it's not... I don't know what gah-- actually what that means" (Educator).*

And, one educator discussed how they felt more knowledgeable about the requirements than the VR staff they were working with:

*"It has, our experience has been, it is personality driven. It is... it is personnel driven. Um... It is the belief of the individual counselor... driven. Um... And that's going to happen in any large bureaucracy, I, I absolutely understand that. Um.. But when WIOA was first kind of rolling out, things, like, I was more informed than some of our front line DVR counselors were, about what their obligations were under this new statute" (Educator).*

And another about their own professional skills and knowledge:

*"I think it's really challenging, as [focus group participant] named, like the amount of things that we have to hold, and the amount of like, pieces that we're expected to already be skilled with, um, transition is, is, in and of itself a whole piece, and the amount of communication that goes into the services, um, is a lot, and yet it's only a blip in the IEP" (Educator).*

And,

*"We always had a transition specialist at the district level. We don't have one now, when you ask our district special ed administration about this program, or that program, they kind of look at you like huh? What's that? DVR? Huh?" (Educator).*

Regional Transition Consultants also reported barriers related to professional skills and knowledge:

*"Um, I think one other barrier is, is I think um... DVR and schools don't really understand each other very well" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*“Um, VRC counselors don't have the understanding of IDEA and provisions of services and transitions. Um so... there has been a lot of loss of respect, I think, for the agency” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*“There's so many different branches and to try to explain the difference between DVR through a CRP, DVR through the the the Pre-ETS ,through contract or through state contractors, have has our heads spinning and can you just imagine the school district coming in” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*“I, do think there's resistance, I think there's resistance in the schools and I think there's resistance within DVR, as well... um, you know, um, not everybody within DVR understands Pre-ETS and when sometimes when we don't know things, it's not a good thing, you know, which isn't necessarily always true” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

**Staff turnover.** Throughout focus groups and interviews, participants also discussed the frequency of staff turnover as a barrier to coordination and service delivery. From the perspective of a regional transition consultant:

*“And so what has happened in the south is there's constant turnover with students and teachers. And so it's really hard to get a relationship going with the school, like I was doing workshops in [Name] High School last year. Um, and then all the staff turned over. And so now it's starting all over again” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And issues of staff turnover from the perspectives of various educators:

*“I was at a workshop like during the summer, and I think it was an Autism workshop actually, and anyway, I was so excited about it and um, and then nothing really happened. Um there was a DVR representative that seemed like um, she really understood it, um but then sh-she I think transferred to a different position within DVR” (Educator).*

And,

*"I think like with anything... One of the challenges is there's, uh, you know, staff turnover...which we have like, almost every year...a lot just falls through the cracks" (Educator).*

And,

*"I had a great DVR counselor that was for our region. She and I developed a program, where she would come once a month into my office...That counselor retired...and then a new one came, who said, I'm not going to come to your school, no, that's not my role. And I will make a, I'll have appointments in my office, for students. But if they can't get here, if, if transportation is a problem, then I'm not going to meet with them, because that tells me they're not job ready. And also, she was really not interested in meeting with anybody, um, under age 21, and barely age 18...I couldn't get anywhere..." (Educator).*

And,

*"...and then [they] went on leave" (Educator).*

## **Values and Beliefs**

Participants identified the importance of providing Pre-ETS to students with disabilities to support successful post-school outcomes. They also recognized that for Pre-ETS to be successful, strong collaboration and communication are essential. Finally, participants discussed the importance of having an ongoing, active VR presence within school buildings.

***Importance of providing needed services.*** Relating back to what participants previously described as current practices and collaborations, stakeholders from each of the four groups described the values and importance of increasing access to coordinated transition services for their students. As one educator said, *"Everyone wants the same thing for these kids, it's just how do we get there"* (Educator). Another educator said:

*"And everybody agrees that getting more, uh, real experiences, and understanding of the, of the world outside of high school is really the important thing. And, um, we're just not getting it. We're just not allowing ourselves to, to get it" (Educator).*

And a regional transition consultant said:

*"My hope is, is that people stay open minded and keep focused on the fact that we're all after the same thing. We all want students to progress through this situation at the highest levels, to be able to meet, um, others' expectations as well as their own. Um, and we all want them to be to be successful, and sometimes we're going to have to just play along regardless of whether that's happening right now." – Regional Transition Consultant*

**Importance of communication.** Another sub-theme that emerged from participants' responses was the value of communication. Participants described the ways communication helps them build relationships with one another, get to learn about what others can contribute to the broader work in supporting students, and develop innovation. One Regional Transition Consultant described this as:

*"To assist students being successful we need to have one level of communication, where we're all on board, while we're all together, while we're all working towards a common goal, or decisions that are being made that impact that, that, conversations with the school" (Regional Transition Consultant).*

**Importance of collaboration.** Participants also described their values and beliefs related to collaboration. Representatives from all four participant groups mentioned their shared value of working within the "spirit of collaboration". Here are a few examples;

*"Um... finger pointing doesn't, doesn't help at all. Yeah, if we could get out of our way a little bit we could be a lot, more effective..." (Educator).*

And,

*"It's always about collaboration" (Educator).*

And,

*"Yeah, and so, you know, the more we can do, be collaborative, because to be honest, everyone has good intent" (Educator).*

## Recommendations for the Future

Participants offered several recommendations to improve the coordination and delivery of VR services across the state. First, participants recommended that statewide leaders provide more specific guidance in implementing Pre-ETS. Second, they recommended that additional training and ongoing professional development related to Pre-ETS be provided. Participants also suggested that “red tape” procedural barriers to providing services be minimized (e.g., requiring handwritten signatures for consent forms, paperwork, scheduling, inconsistent communication and follow through, limited contact, no follow up, limited participation). More generally, they recognized the need for stronger collaboration between school and VR entities.

***Institute more guidance and support from leadership.*** Regional Transition Consultants described a need for more guidance and support from leadership to better support their work. As many of the previous themes and quotations describe, Regional Transition consultants are charged with the large task of ensuring the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to a broad number of students within their regions; they are encountering barriers when it comes to internal agency conflict, working around policies and procedures to build relationships with schools, professional development, and staff retention. Several of the Regional Transition Consultants who participated in the focus groups suggested more guidance and support from leadership is needed to help address these issues. For example:

*“And I also think, um, leadership has, has, been a challenge, um, in barriers in coordinating services with schools like I said, we haven't really gotten an instruction manual on how to deliver services how-how to... “the How.” You know, the-they leadership has done a good job on explaining “the Why,” but “the How” really is.. really important for us as RTCs, because “the How” is, you know, a lot of our job, uh, how to deliver services. And I don't feel that we've been getting adequate training in that regard” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*“And I, I hope that DVR figures this out, because it's really difficult for us to poker face when we're working with the districts, when we're not communicated the very gist of what our job is, decisions are being done that-- it's impacting your ground work without us even knowing, even, you know, uh,*

*decisions with contractors, changes coming down the pike, us being cut off from essential meetings to have conversations I mean these are the main challenges” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

And,

*“I have not seen as unhealthy of a situation... and I've worked for a lot of governments, um, it-it's-it needs to be addressed, because that's how we can really be successful” (Regional Transition Consultant).*

Educators also discussed the importance of leadership, with one commenting specifically about the accountability measures in place to ensure staff are meeting their targets:

*“So, I do have a question, if they're obligated and they're not doing that, then like, where, where is the accountability behind, behind that, I know, um, that would, if I, if I'm out of compliance, Holy cow. Where, where is that accountability” (Educator).*

Another educator described the importance of leadership from school administrators, who need to be open and supportive of building collaborative partnerships with outside agencies like Vocational Rehabilitation:

*“So, so we have a great relationship, you know with DVR, a transition specialist in our district would really help with that connection across the district, right, for me, I'll do it at my schools, but we need, especially a administrator who's going to be supportive and help with that” (Educator).*

**Provide more professional development and training.** A common suggestion and recommendation from focus group participants was improved professional development and training. Many stakeholders described their own lack of professional skills and knowledge to engage in collaborative transition-related partnerships, or the lack of professional skills and knowledge of others.

*“Um, I think they.. this, there needs to be more staffing, um, that specialize in high school, transition level, DVR counseling. Because, too often, the default point of view from educators, parents, even VR, um, is that when we're talking about disability community resources, or employment support, what we're talking about are our most high needs students, our most significantly disabled*

students, we're not, for the most part, the, the, the field isn't naturally thinking about our student with ADHD, who's going to be college bound and needs to... um, have some self-advocacy, and to know, what their, you know, their civil rights are and how do they, uh, get those reasonable accommodations. Um... So, so what we have are two giant systems, k-12 system, adult disability services, that, in the state of Washington, are not, are not, um, on the same statewide committees, probably, are not really, um, embedded in OSPI... I believe. Um, you know Chris Reykdal isn't talking to VR people, I believe, and maybe I'm wrong, um... but if they were, it would be more part of special education, training and preparation. I don't believe... [stammers] and I don't believe that, um, our teacher, special education teacher preparation programs, our administrator preparation programs, our counselor preparation programs, our school psychologist preparation programs, are bringing in any community disability support linkage, um, education, I guess or, or, knowledge base. Um... All of those people I'd mentioned, work with our students with disabilities, because inclusion is everything, right, inclusion, inclusion, inclusion. Well, if inclusion is going to be everything, and that's fine, then it behooves us to make sure everybody that touches a kiddo, in the school, knows about DVR, knows about DDA, knows about college disability resources, knows what a reasonable accommodation is, knows about ADA... On top of knowing, what is the graduation requirements for the class of 2023, that's going to be different graduation requirements in the class of 2022, which were different graduation requirements than the class of 2020, COVID aside" (Educator).

And,

"Um, I, I, like I said I don't even know who to contact, err, I mean I could, I'll figure it out, I'm resourceful, but I don't feel like I should have to work that hard to get some service that is already supposed to be provided to my students" (Educator).

And,

"What, what would be, what would be nice, is if we had a state VR person come and talk with, say, the guidance counselors every year" (Educator).

And,

*"If it [learning about vocational rehabilitation services] was part of the preparation program for any educator... in the state, I think that could be valuable" (Educator).*

And,

*"we don't know the formula, you know, we don't, we don't know, um do we put in all of this time, and-and energy and then they're just gonna say, "We don't have anything for you, we can't do anything for you." So, its you know, it's discouraging" (Educator).*

**Improve communication and collaboration.** Another frequent recommendation from participants was a need to improve communication and collaboration between school and VR agency staff. School personnel had a lot to say about this recommendation, and called for more action and engagement from VR agency to staff to take the lead in establishing and maintaining relationships. This recommendation from participants was also reflected in the ways they talked about communication and collaboration in the themes of what's happening now, strengths and strategies, values and beliefs, and barriers.

As one educator recommended:

*"I'm going to go ahead and jump in, um, because I'm going to go big, uh, I just think we need to -- we need contact, we need consistent contact. Um, I think, they need to be checking in, numerous times, our kids ebb and flow, in and out, we get new ones all the time" (Educator).*

And, on working together:

*"Well I think, I mean we need to communicate, we need to, we just, we need information, we need to know kind of, their side too, like where they're coming from, um, I wanna be able to steer my s-students and you know, in the right direction and I don't want to waste their time if-if nothings gonna come from it, but the I don't know what else to do" (Educator).*

And, on visiting the school to learn more about what the day-to-day routine is like:

*"It took that person coming into the school, uh, emails are fine but I get, I just, I get emails all day, like, those are, they don't, they don't carry a lot of weight.*

*Honestly, if you come into my building, you're going to, and then, maybe, send emails, and it's going to take a little bit of work, but I think putting that initial time into visiting a school is really critical" (Educator).*

And,

*"So I think that someone in a DVR position, should hold, like, similar to how ed specialists hold a caseload of students, and we then navigate of, like, what, what needs, do the does each kid have, I think, that, um, I'm gonna call them case managers at DVR, should hold schools in the same vein, um so like, [Name] around the point of like, being physically in the school building, like, allows folks to see, how, the pulse of it, right, how do kids transition from one place to another, how do kids interact with one another, how do teachers feel about what, I'd, like, you just get a feeling for the school environment and "look at that there's, oh, there's after school programs, oh kids go to office hours." Maybe that's an opportunity to even blend like, "hey here's an extra opportunity that DVR could provide after school, we could hold this for your school." Just like finding, like, look at their schedule, get an idea for their timing of days, and how their days are broken up and say, DVR can actually fit into this space, rather than us trying to figure, because the hardest part is like me trying to mastermind [laughs] my schedule, and then masterminding someone else, coming into that schedule, and fitting them in is really challenging. So if they can just, "hey, here's what I got, this is how I'm laid out" like, "Where can you fit?" I think is super helpful for that process, um, and would take, honestly, a lot of the burden of like, trying to make something work and fit like a square peg round hole" (Educator).*

And,

*"There does need to be some push and some, like more of a... Yeah, more of an annoyance. and not the word I want to use, but like more of a push on the DVR end of like, "Hey, you took this, great, we have these things to offer this, and she really en-enticed me by showing me this like, video of like, showing kids through an experience of like being a lawyer, being a doctor, what that looks like, firsthand like visual, because we were going into virtual school and I was like, let's do it. She's like, but you need to sign these papers in order to get to it. And I was like dammit, dammit. Fine, I'll sign the papers. [Laughs] So, she like, got me and I was like, I got hooked. And what, was just really smart about how she... [trails off]" (Educator).*

One educator also talk about how helpful it would be to have someone who understands both the educational and the Vocational Rehabilitation side of things, and helped provide a better transition from one system to another:

*“Like in high school we're obligated to provide you services and so if you don't come to your IEP meeting we reach out to you,...As soon as you leave high school...it's-it's totally opposite. Like you have, the person has to go and seek those services from agencies and sometimes just having, like, if there was somebody that kind of had a foot in both worlds. I'm hoping that maybe, that can be part of what she [Regional Transition Consultant] does, is guide them to ha- to making sure that they are established with DVR, b-because th-that seems to be where things just don't happen once kids leave high school” (Educator).*

**Reducing barriers and “red tape” to services.** Participants also recommended a reduction in barriers and “red tape” to services. Some of this “red tape” included handwritten signatures requirements for consent forms, paperwork, scheduling, inconsistent communication and follow through, limited contact, no follow up, and limited engagement and participation.

As one educator described:

*“I think a barrier was, initially the barrier was, um, the signature forums, and the specificity [laughs] of how those forms need to be filled out, um, giving it to families and then asking them to fill it out to then return to me, me sending it in, a way that, it all had to be, it was all very, felt very clunky, and, and then sending it back, being like this isn't right, and then having to send--it was just a lot of back and forth.” - Special Education Teacher*

Two educators also entered into an exchange about the barriers to navigating the Vocational Rehabilitation system, and the recommendation that they make this more streamlined and accessible to educators, students and families:

**Educator 1:** *Um and even when I've gone to meet with our, the person that's assigned to our high school and lots of other high schools, I just wanted like a step by step, this is how people get services, just-just lay it... (laughs), Yes I know. Just lay it out-*

**Educator 2:** *-a flow chart, something.*

**Educator 1:** *I tried, and it doesn't go, it's like it's a, I started, I took a notepad, I was writing things down, but it just, it keeps going in circles, and then you-you get like two steps and then there's this circle, then a circle that leads off of this and then you get up, back up to step number one 'cause you thought you got from one to two, but it was another circle. Um, and you just don't seem to get anywhere, and that's been my, the parents' kind of, kind of thing too is that we've have meeting, we've had meetings and then they'll do so-, they'll plan to do something and then when they get to the point to do it, they'll say, 'Oh, the school's supposed to do that' or, 'The school pays for that,' or the... And so one of the things is, is we're trying to do, um, like evaluation to see if we can come up with a couple of things that students may or may not need, but you know, we're gonna do that bec-and it's been slow because of COVID, but um we're working through that piece but, like we're all for doing what, if you give us the five steps we need to do, we will do them. We just need them in a linear fashion.*

**Educator 2:** *And it, and it seems to cha-, and it seems to change every year, um, you know like one year you feel like you're getting somewhere and I feel like, 'Okay I've got it kind of set up for,' you know of my students and then the, and then the next year the game has changed, there's new rules and so... and I'll be, I'll have the one representative that's, like our representative for our school, and sh-she'll come to s-some IEP meetings.*

Another educator described their recommendation for a more streamlined connection between Regional Transition Consultants and High School Counselor Liaisons:

*"It feels very separate right now...you've got two different workers. I don't know, to be honest, if they talk to each other. [Shrugs]... So, so, right now they do feel very separate, but I'd be nice if they weren't. If it was more of a flow" (Educator).*

Educators also described the ways these systems are difficult for families to navigate:

*"I've even got another family that I've been working with trying to-to figure things out and they've been involved with DVR for a couple of years and they, the-the parent says that they have meetings and it's like they have meetings to have meetings, there's not a lot of, that gets done" (Educator).*

And,

*“Um, but I think, I think, somehow, somehow getting in touch with families and sending them this information when their kid gets into high school, or something, so that they can be like “hey what’s this DVR thing about ” (Educator).*

An Educator also talked about how it’s not as easy as Vocational Rehabilitation staff think it is for them to come in and provide services to students in schools, and how it maybe something that could be addressed in the future:

*I mean, the, the, uh, gymnastics that goes along into... a non-certified adult coming [into a school] and working with kids, uh, young adults even is, uh, really difficult ” (Educator).*

## **DISCUSSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS**

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The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act of 2014 (WIOA of 2014) has dramatically changed the way Vocational Rehabilitation agencies provide services to youth and young adults with disabilities. Prior to WIOA, a state vocational rehabilitation agency the size of Washington might have provided individualized Vocational Rehabilitation services to an estimated 2,000 people younger than 24. After WIOA, a state the size Washington may be required to ensure the coordination and delivery of pre-employment transition services to up to 50,000 potentially eligible students with disabilities. This is an increase of 2400%.

Seven years after the reauthorization of WIOA, states have struggled to be as nimble as needed to make such a significant change. From a 2017 survey, fewer than half of state VR agencies spent the required 15% of their federal budget; nationally, states spent about \$130 million less than their target in 2015 (GOA, 2018). Studies have also documented the outcomes, barriers, and strategies of VR and education agencies as they work to implement WIOA’s pre-employment transition services requirement (Awsumb, 2020; Carter, et al., 2020; Carlson, 2020; Shultz, et al., 2021; Sherman, et al., 2017; and, Taylor et al., 2021). These studies suggest a strong professional commitment to supporting transition services and outcomes for potentially eligible students with disabilities (Carter, et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021); but limited detailed plans for accomplishing these goals (Taylor et al., 2021)). Perceptions among

educators, VR staff and families generally suggest these services have been difficult to coordinate and deliver (Carter et al., 2020; Sherman, 2019; and Shultz, et al., 2021).

Despite our justifications for the difficulties that states like Washington are experiencing in adapting to WIOA; the intentions that drive WIOA are admirable and research informed (Test al., 2009; Mazzotti, et al., 2019). We want to see these services get delivered to students, and it is our belief doing so will positively impact the occupational outcomes of millions of youth and young adults. And, as one of our focus group participants put it, “it's just [begins to bring two hands together]--we need to make that connection, we need to bring things together”.

## **Summary and Broad Findings**

This evaluation builds off of prior work in Washington to document, understand, and inform the way one state implements the rules and regulations related to pre-employment transition services. Prior work has documented the magnitude of the number of potentially eligible students with disabilities, and the extent to which these individuals may need additional services because they're not already receiving them in school (Johnson & Poppen, 2017; Poppen & Alsalamah 2020). Prior work has also developed a data-based decision making and capacity building model to support school and Vocational Rehabilitation teams use of information about the availability, accessibility and coordination of school-based transition services to identify and address gaps in services (Poppen, 2018).

In this evaluation, a set of seven guiding questions were developed to explore the experiences, needs, barriers, strategies, and recommendations of educators and VR staff engaged in the coordinated delivery of Vocational Rehabilitation transition services. The answers to these questions are intended to inform the development and implementation of the Washington Transition Program, which is described in more detail in the introduction. The evaluators utilized qualitative methods and held focus groups and interviews with 25 educators, DVR Regional Transition Consultants, DVR High School Counselor Liaisons, and DVR Contractors. The guiding questions helped inform a unique interview protocol for each stakeholder group. We analyzed the data using an inductive approach, and five themes emerged: (1) What's happening now; (2) Strengths and strategies; (3) Barriers; (4) Values and beliefs; and (5) Recommendations for the future. See Table 2 on the next page for a summary of themes and sub themes with examples and quotes.

Table 2

Table Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes with Example Quotations

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
What's happening now	Shared Importance of the Work Collaboration Inconsistency and disconnectedness Service Details	<i>"So, um, I think it's spotty, in my, my area. Um, I know they've like offered to do presentations, videos, um, interviews... but... [shrugs and throws her hands up]. That's my experience."</i> (Special Education Teacher)
Strengths and strategies	Establishing connections Partnerships and collaboration Flexibility and innovation Starting small and advanced planning Summer programming Working virtually	<i>"I have seen a lot of positive outcomes since we've had a full team, even across the state with the amount of outreach and, and how much we've been able to do in such a short given time that we've had with little training and all of those"</i> (Regional Transition Consultant)
Barriers	Doing the work Relationships Policy and Procedures Professional skills and knowledge Staff turnover	<i>"I have not seen as unhealthy of a situation..."</i> (Regional Transition Consultant).  <i>"Um, I think one other barrier is, is I think um... DVR and schools don't really understand each other very well"</i> (Regional Transition Consultant).
Values and Beliefs	Importance of collaboration Importance of providing services Importance of being in schools Importance of communication	<i>"Um... finger pointing doesn't, doesn't help at all. Yeah, if we could get out of our way a little bit we could be a lot, more effective..."</i> (Educator).
Recommendations for the Future	More guidance and support from leadership Professional development and training Improved collaboration Reducing barriers and "red tape"	<i>"... we have to be consistent [with schools]. We have to be respectful of their rules and their guidelines. We can't impose all of our bureaucracy upon them, we need to look at these and try to break those down a little bit to the best of our ability"</i> (Regional Transition Consultant).

## **Connecting the Results to the Literature**

The information we learned from educators, VR staff and contractors confirmed and extended some of what peer-reviewed literature has shown about the experiences of school and VR agencies in adapting to the changes of WIOA and the addition of pre-employment transition services. While there have only been a handful of these publications so far, they provide a means to see how consistent Washington's experiences are with what's been happening nationally; and may offer additional information as Washington works to improve their transition services and supports. This section connects the results from our evaluation to the literature.

Participants in the current evaluation discussed barriers related to statewide policies and procedures in coordinating and delivering the continuum of VR transition services, and recommended more guidance and support from leadership in how to do this work. State plans are one way that VR agencies communicate their statewide policies and procedures with local and national audiences, and prior research has reviewed several of these plans to determine what states are doing to deliver pre-employment transition services to potentially eligible students (Carlson et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). The findings from these studies mirror some of what our participants reported, and suggest that generally state plans vary in quality and specificity. In one example, many of the state plans that were reviewed included limited details about what pre-employment transition services are, how they fit within the broader continuum of VR services, and descriptions of how services will be delivered to potentially eligible students with disabilities (Taylor et al., 2021). These authors suggest that more specificity in VR agencies state plans will help agencies reduce the policy-to-practice gap and support the goals of WIOA (Taylor et al., 2021).

In another study, Awsumb et al. (2020) conducted interviews with eight VR or educational staff to learn about their perspectives of employment outcomes for youth with disabilities and their collaborative interagency relationship between schools and VR. Participants described the importance of resources and opportunities and services for youth and young adults with disabilities to access services from VR. They also reported several systemic barriers to students, including mis-information to youth and families about the purpose and benefits of VR (Awsumb, et al., 2020). The results from our current evaluation project align with the findings from this study, and highlight a shared importance of the work, accompanied by stakeholders' frustrations with inconsistency, disconnectedness, and limited details about how services can and will be provided to youth with disabilities. The results from our current evaluation did not reveal concerns about mis-information related to the purpose and benefits of VR

being shared with students and families, but educator participants did report feeling like they are receiving mis-information about what services students can and cannot access and that as a result, they are hesitate to share this information with students and families. Awsumb et al. (2020) suggested further training within VR on roles and responsibilities, and specific practices for supporting services for youth with disabilities could help to address each of these concerns. The results from our current evaluation project align with these recommendations.

Additionally, a survey study conducted in the 2014-2015 school year explored the perceptions of collaboration between school and VR from 135 local community transition team members in South Carolina (Plotner et al., 2017). Participants reported a lack of understanding in the differences between school- and agency-provided transition services, and that educators had a difficult time coordinating with services and agencies that were outside of their school, perhaps as a result of time or prioritization (Plotner, et al., 2017). While the data for this study were collected just as WIOA was announced, the findings from our current evaluation project reveal similar trends. We do estimate that the participants in our focus groups and interviews have a greater degree of knowledge about the differences in school and agency provided services than they did six years ago, but our findings certainly reveal this knowledge is still limited. Further, findings from our current evaluation reinforce the difficulties school and VR staff have in finding ways to deliver services to students.

Carter et al. (2021) completed a national survey with 596 middle and high school educators on their perceptions of pre-employment transition services. Results from this survey suggest educators believe most youth with disabilities in their school need substantial help preparing for the world of work; but they didn't fully understand what pre-employment transition service are, who is eligible, and the logistical details of how they can be provided to students (Carter et al., 2021). This study also showed that educators wanted to collaborate more with VR, but that they do not have enough resources or time to do this, or don't know about effective models for collaboration (Carter, et al., 2021). Educators in this study also suggested barriers to improved collaboration include too few resources within their local communities, communication with agencies, limited services, mixed messages to students and families, and a lack of professional skills and knowledge (Carter et al., 2021). The findings from our current evaluation project confirm and extend these findings, suggesting that VR staff and contractors have similar experiences and struggles in coordinating and delivering transition services to potentially eligible students with disabilities. Carter et al. (2021) suggest more can be done to improve school and VR collaboration, including more professional development initiatives that involve both

school and VR stakeholders; and, developing local models for collaborating across systems.

Additional studies have also explored the perceptions of VR professionals on the changes to their agencies and practice as a result of WIOA. In national sample of VR professionals, Sherman et al. (2019) reported that a majority of VR professionals (87%) believe that WIOA has affected factors related to successful employment outcomes, including through pre-employment transition services. Respondents reported pre-employment transition services have gotten in the way of their ability to build rapport with their clients, and that these services have created confusion among school staff (Sherman, et al., 2019). Survey respondents cited frustrations with the impact WIOA has had on their budgets and the increase in paperwork and documentation required as a result of WIOA (Sherman, et al., 2019). Respondents also reported agency guidance, policies and procedures have had a negative impact on successful client outcomes (Sherman, et al., 2019). Many of the findings from Sherman et al (2019) were revealed throughout our interviews and focus groups with VR regional transition consultants and high school counselor liaisons; and also frame and explain some of the current resistance to the substantial pivot required as a result of WIOA.

Prior research has also investigated the experiences of families and parents throughout the recent changes in WIOA and expanded services to potentially eligible students with disabilities. In a national survey of 253 parents of transition age youth with disabilities, parents agreed that services aligning with each of the five pre-employment transition service categories would be beneficial to their students; however, they also reported they were *not at all familiar* or *a little familiar* with the resources available to provide these services (Shulz et al., 2021). These parents also reported that the availability of services and supports after graduation is a barrier to their child's future employment (Shultz, et al., 2021). The current evaluation project did not include families and parents in the focus groups and interviews, but some participants did bring up the importance of sharing information with students and families because of their limited familiarity with what services are available to them or their children from VR. Shultz et al. (2021) suggest these gaps could be addressed with additional professional development and training to VR staff on how to work with parents and families, and the importance of state agencies developing resources and materials that are intended for these audiences.

A manuscript from Taylor, et al., 2019 described strategies to promote effective interagency collaboration between schools and VR agencies, and included the

following recommendations: (1) expand collaboration between VR and schools, (2) seek out and disseminate information about specific pre-employment transition services opportunities, (3) encourage inclusive education and community-integrated work-based learning for students, (4) provide work-based learning experiences, promote opportunities to strengthen student self-determination, and (5) provide counseling on postsecondary education options for all students. Taylor et al., (2019) also described some potential ways that local VR staff can partner with schools; including partnering during transition meetings, sponsoring work experiences, delivery work readiness and self-advocacy training, and helping students with career exploration. The participants in our evaluation spoke about the importance of expanding collaboration between school and VR and gaining clarity in logistical details of what pre-employment transition services are and how they can be delivered to students. However, our participants did not talk as much about the importance of, or strategies for, delivering specific services (like work-based learning, counseling on enrollment on postsecondary education options, workplace readiness, self-advocacy training, and career exploration). Perhaps starting with clarification about the “what, who, and how” of school and VR collaboration will pave the way for these important practice oriented recommendations.

Additionally, a recent practitioner-oriented paper discussed some of the ways a culturally responsive framework could be used during the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services (Brown, et al., 2021). This framework includes working with students and their families to build critical consciousness, relationships and motivation; and to incorporate cultural responsiveness and critical action into pre-employment transition services delivery (Brown et al., 2021). Through self-advocacy, for example, a practitioner can support students taking the lead in their career development activities, including considering the ways interests and responsibilities at home may impact availability (Brown et al., 2021). Additionally, in job placement and post-secondary education counseling, a practitioner could support their students through reassurance, affirmation, and bringing in balanced information (Brown et al., 2021). Through cultural responsiveness and critical action, practitioners can also increase the quality of work-based learning experiences and workplace readiness training. This can include communicating high expectations, reassurance, and supporting connections to others within the community who might be able to offer mentorship and opportunities (Brown et al., 2021). Throughout the focus groups and interviews in the current evaluation project, participants talked about the importance of the work in helping students achieve improved outcomes; but only three of the 25 participants discussed the importance of delivering culturally sustaining services.

The results of our current evaluation project align with and extend many of the findings from the current body of literature exploring the impact of WIOA on the continuum of VR services for youth and young adults with disabilities. Consistent with findings from previous work, the findings from our evaluation study suggest participants would like more detailed descriptions of how pre-employment transition services can be delivered to students, and guidance and support from leadership in doing so. However, the findings from the current study also highlight the shared importance of this work from the variety of stakeholders who are involved, and some potential strategies for improving collaboration between schools and local DVR agencies. These strategies included remaining flexible and innovative, starting small, planning well in advance, using time during the summer to provide services, and taking advantage of our new virtual work environments to deliver services in ways that we haven't been able to before. Like these other studies, our participants also identified a number of barriers that have made it difficult to deliver services to students. The findings from our current evaluation shed additional light into some of the issues with inconsistency and disconnectedness that educators in Washington are experiencing in building collaborative relationships with local VR agencies and staff, and concerns about staff turn over that have made building these relationships particularly challenging. Lastly, the results from our current evaluation extend some of the findings from the literature by highlighting the values and beliefs of the educators, VR staff, and contractors who are involved with trying to implement the changes outlined by WIOA.

The findings from this study have been used to inform a revised version of the Washington Transition Program, which now includes more emphasis on building knowledge and collaboration across stakeholders and establishing concrete strategies to support the delivery and coordination of pre-employment transition services.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations that should be considered when reading and interpreting the findings from this evaluation. The first of these limitations is that this evaluation was designed to support the needs of Washington Vocational Rehabilitation, and that the guiding questions and methods were informed using their input and suggestions. While this can also be a strength, it's important to note that the direction of this study was not entirely objective, and was intended to inform future work. A second limitation is that the sample of stakeholders who participated in this study, and their views, may not fully reflect those of the field. We took a

purposeful sampling approach and recruited individuals who were interested in school and VR collaboration and talking about their experiences. While this provided the benefits of participants who had things they wanted to share, there is a chance that this approach could have led to an overrepresentation of some themes, and an underrepresentation of others. A third limitation is that within our evaluation, only six of the 25 participants were educators, and only three were regional transition consultants. As mentioned previously in this report, these two stakeholder groups represent a critical perspective in answering the questions we sought to answer and the study could have been strengthened with a greater number of individuals from these two groups. A fourth limitation is that this evaluation did not explore the perspectives of students and families, who are the intended recipients of the services that are discussed. Future work should seek to incorporate their perspectives into these practices and processes in Washington. The last limitation that we'll mention is that this is an evaluation study, and not a peer-reviewed manuscript. While we have taken every effort to design a rigorous and methodologically sound evaluation, the project has not gone under peer-review. To address this limitation, we provided robust descriptions of most aspects of the study.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

As a result of this evaluation, we offer a limited set of recommendations for policy and practice that help to build off of the strengths and strategies of current collaborators to address barriers and gaps in coordination between schools and VR in Washington.

***Increase the accessibility and coordination of services.*** Throughout this evaluation it was clear that students continue to need additional access to services along the continuum of VR services (including pre-employment transition services) because they need them and are not receiving them. It is recommended that Washington VR continue to expand the extent to which potentially eligible students with disabilities receive services.

***Develop common knowledge.*** This evaluation shed light into professional skills and knowledge limitations when it comes to coordinating and delivering coordinated transition services. Washington VR should continue to develop resources and supports to educators, VR staff and stakeholders in developing a common understanding of the continuum of VR services that are available to youth and students with disabilities.

**Take action and be engaged.** One of the topics that cut across themes from our evaluation was the importance of VR getting services to students, and the challenges that educators are facing in bringing in outside collaborators into their schools. We recommend that Washington VR staff work exceptionally hard to use the resources that they have to take action to support educators and students, and lead their school partners through the process (this as opposed to waiting until a school reaches out).

**Provide additional leadership and guidance.** As was clearly described throughout our interviews and focus groups, the people who are coordinating and delivering transition services to youth want additional leadership and guidance. This is also consistent with what existing research has to say about this topic. It is our recommendation that Washington VR provides additional leadership and guidance to Vocational Rehabilitation staff on strategies for coordinating and delivering services along the VR continuum of services for youth and students with disabilities; and that these changes in policy and guidance are communicated with staff with opportunities for feedback and suggestions.

**Highlight flexibility and innovation.** Throughout our interviews and focus groups, participants discussed the importance of being flexible and innovative in the ways that they deliver and provide services. We recommend that WA VR work to promote and highlight innovation when it happens, and support opportunities for this innovation to be replicated throughout the state. This is something that could be done through ongoing statewide transition conferences, regional and local networks, social media and internal dissemination (i.e., newsletters, briefs).

**Focus on consistency and follow through.** One of the topics that cut across themes was the importance of consistency and follow through. We recommend that Washington VR staff pay particular attention to and prioritize frequency and follow-through in their relationships with educators and vendors.

**Be relationship forward.** The participants in our evaluation study clearly described a shared sense of importance related to this work, and a desire to build and support opportunities for transition services for youth and students who need them. However, participants also describe the consequences of staff turnover and the challenges with building longstanding relationships with one another. We recommend that VR staff, educators, and contractors prioritize the quality of their relationships with one another, and join over their shared interests in supporting students and building relationships that can withstand the trials and tribulations of this kind of work.

***Start small, dream big.*** Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants described their interest in supporting successful outcomes for students with disabilities; but feeling stuck about where to begin because of the scope of their tasks. A few participants discussed the ways that starting small and focusing on the things that are manageable has been an effective strategy for them in growing their service delivery systems. We recommend VR staff, educators, and contractors take a similar approach in their work with one another and start small, with the idea that these small steps will lead to bigger ones.

## **Conclusion**

This evaluation builds off of prior work in Washington to document, understand, and inform the way one state implements the rules and regulations related to pre-employment transition services. The results from this evaluation provide additional information on the experiences, needs, barriers, strategies and recommendations of educators and VR staff engaged in the coordinated delivery of Vocational Rehabilitation services for youth and students with disabilities. The results highlight a shared importance of the work, pockets of strength, and several barriers to effective coordination and recommendations for the future. These results have been used to inform the development and implementation of the Washington Transition Program, and also include implications that extend beyond that project.

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

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## School Personnel Interview/Focus Group Protocol

### Agenda (60-90 Minutes)

Introductions and Statement  
Questions

### Introduction

*Thank you so much for being part of this interview. We will be asking you some questions about your experiences with providing and coordinated transition services for students with disabilities, with an emphasis on your experiences working with Vocational Rehabilitation. This is a part of a broader evaluation being conducted by the Washington State University Research and Innovation in Special Education Collaborative.*

*We are interested in hearing your honest opinions, both good and bad, so that we can accurately describe some of the current experiences that teachers are having in coordinating transition services with VR, barriers, strategies, and recommendations. You don't have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. If you would prefer to skip a question, you may state you would like to pass. We will be recording this discussion, taking notes, and we may use quotations in our findings; however, your responses will remain confidential and reported without any identifying information.*

*Are there any questions before we get started?*

### Questions

1. Introductions (name, role, work setting, experience as an educator)
2. What do you know about VR's obligations to serve students with disabilities? How would you describe the various types of services that Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) provides for youth and students with disabilities who are still in high school?
3. What does your current relationship with VR look like? What have been your experiences in coordinating services together?
4. What are some of the challenges, or barriers, that you face in coordinating services with VR?
5. What are some of the strategies that you've used to find success in your coordination with VR?
6. What is your perception about what the relationship between schools and VR should be? What do you think it would take to get there and what needs to be in place? Who would be involved? If you could transform your current relationship with VR, what would you change?
7. Do you have any other comments that you would like to share?

**Thank you!**

## VR Personnel Interview/Focus Group Protocol

### Agenda (60-90 Minutes)

Introductions and Statement  
Questions

### Introduction

*Thank you so much for being part of this interview. We will be asking you some questions about your experiences working with schools. This is a part of a broader evaluation being conducted by the Washington State University Research and Innovation in Special Education Collaborative.*

*We are interested in hearing your honest opinions, both good and bad, so that we can accurately describe some of the current experiences that VR staff are having coordinating transition services with schools, barriers, strategies, and recommendations. You don't have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. If you would prefer to skip a question, you may state you would like to pass. We will be recording this discussion, taking notes, and we may use quotations in our findings; however, your responses will remain confidential and reported without any identifying information.*

*Are there any questions before we get started?*

### Questions

1. Introductions (name, role, work setting, experience as an educator)
2. What do you know about VR's obligations to serve students with disabilities? How would you describe the various types of services that Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) provides for youth and students with disabilities who are still in high school?
3. What does your current relationship with schools look like? What have been your experiences in coordinating services together?
4. What are some of the challenges, or barriers, that you face in coordinating services with schools?
5. What are some of the strategies that you've used to find success in your coordination with schools?
6. What is your perception about what the relationship between schools and VR should be? What do you think it would take to get there and what needs to be in place? Who would be involved? What is your perception about what the relationship between schools and VR should be?
7. Do you have any other comments that you would like to share?

### Thank you!

## **Contractors/Providers Interview/Focus Group Protocol**

### **Agenda (60-90 Minutes)**

Introductions and Statement  
Questions

### **Introduction**

*Thank you so much for being part of this interview. We will be asking you some questions about your experiences delivering services to students with disabilities in high schools. This is a part of a broader evaluation being conducted by the Washington State University Research and Innovation in Special Education Collaborative.*

*We are interested in hearing your honest opinions, both good and bad, so that we can accurately describe some of the current experiences providers are having in providing services, barriers, strategies, and recommendations. You don't have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. If you would prefer to skip a question, you may state you would like to pass. We will be recording this discussion, taking notes, and we may use quotations in our findings; however, your responses will remain confidential and reported without any identifying information.*

*Are there any questions before we get started?*

### **Questions**

1. Introductions (name, role, work setting, experience as an educator)
2. What do you know about VR's obligations to serve students with disabilities? How do the services that you provide fit within this obligation?
3. What services do you provide to high school students with disabilities? How are the services that need to be provided identified? What does the coordination and delivery of these services look like?
4. What are some of the challenges, or barriers, that you face in providing services to high school students with disabilities?
5. What are some of the strategies that you've used to find success in providing services to high school students with disabilities?
6. What is your perception about what the relationship between schools, providers and VR should be? What do you think it would take to get there and what needs to be in place? Who would be involved? If you could transform the way you provided services to schools, what would change?
7. Do you have any other comments that you would like to share?

### **Thank you!**