

## **A Preparation Program for Students with Significant Disabilities**

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Currently, educational trends and issues impacting students with disabilities include the increase in general education standards, and the differing state graduation and certificate exit requirements. Current and future educational reform must include and be especially responsive to the secondary programming needs of students with significant disabilities. Otherwise, the post-school outcomes of these students, which are already far less than satisfactory, can be expected to worsen. The need for effective programming for this population was recognized nearly 10 years ago, for example, when Johnson and Rusch (1993) indicated that one of the five need areas for future research and demonstration at the secondary level was employment training for students with severe disabilities.

The most compelling evidence of the need for improved programs for students with significant disabilities can be found in the results of studies examining the post-school outcomes of this population. In one national outcome study, for example, it was found that these individuals had a “pattern of limited access to post-secondary education programs, employment instability, dependence on others for residence and other forms of support, limited participation in community social events, and significant levels of social isolation” (*Policy Research Brief*, 1996, p. 8). Other studies have reported that (a) the unemployment rate for persons with severe disabilities was 79% (Wehman, Kregel, & Seyfarth, 1985); (b) as many as 80% of adults with mental retardation are either unemployed, or underemployed (Kiernan & Stark, 1986); (c) for those with severe disabilities who are employed, the average earning is \$150 (or less) per month with less than one-fourth receiving fringe benefits (*Policy Research Brief*, 1996); and (d) for those with mental retardation who are employed, wages are far below the poverty line (McDonnell, Wilcox, & Hardman, 1991). It is for these and other reasons that educational reform is sorely needed for students with significant disabilities, and herein lies the purpose of the project entitled “The ‘Work Links’ Occupational Preparation Program.”

### **The Work Links Occupational Preparation Program <sup>2</sup>**

In 2000, a 4-year model demonstration grant was secured from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services to address the needs of Alabama’s high school students with significant disabilities. The purpose of this on-line paper is to describe the nature of the program

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that is to provide an occupational preparation curriculum to these students. The program is presented in terms of its (a) purpose, (b) design, (c) participants, (d) curriculum framework, (e) occupational preparation component, and (f) program completion.

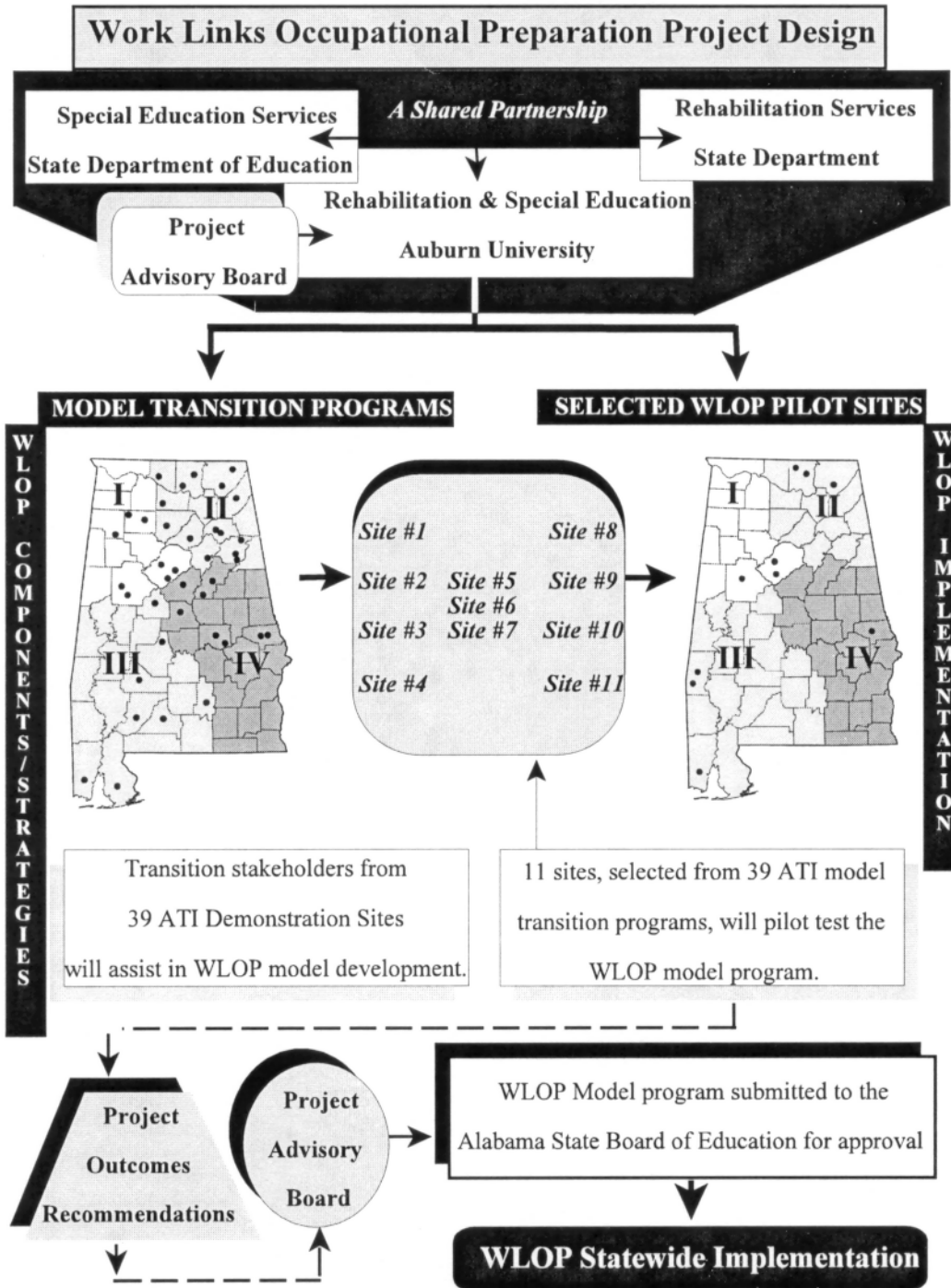
### **Program Purpose**

The purpose of this model demonstration Project is to develop a functional, standards-based occupational preparation program for high school students with moderate/severe disabilities. Further, it is to be an occupational preparation program that incorporates 'best practices' for delivering transition services and is applicable to classroom, school, community, and employment settings. Specifically, the three primary objectives are to (a) develop a secondary program option for students with significant (moderate/severe) disabilities; (b) pilot test this newly developed secondary program; and (c) implement statewide this model high school preparation program for students with significant disabilities. At the time this paper is being prepared, the program is in its third year and beginning the pilot phase (second objective).

Because of the nature and potential magnitude of this program development, an advisory board was established to help steer the project in accordance with its objectives and the unique considerations of the state. The advisory board is comprised primarily of key staff members representing Special Education Services, the Alabama State Department of Education, and the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services. Also, there is a task force comprised of a diverse group whose members have experience specifically working with persons with moderate to severe disabilities. This group includes (a) a special education teacher, (b) a career technical teacher, (c) a general education teacher, (d) a transition counselor, (e) a student, (f) a parent, (g) an employer, (h) a rehabilitation counselor, (i) a job coach, and (j) an appointed member from the State of Alabama Department of Education.

### **Project Design**

The project's general design reflects a shared partnership between Special Education Services, Alabama Department of Education, the State Department of Rehabilitation Services, and Auburn University, the host applicant. During the first year, personnel representing 39 of Alabama's demonstration transition programs identified the components and strategies for the model program to be developed. Beginning year two, 11 selected sites from the original 39 began piloting the Work Links transition program. Concurrently, ongoing program evaluation was implemented by a research team using multiple evaluation strategies. The findings of this study will be submitted as a written report submitted to the project's advisory board. In turn, the advisory board will submit the findings with recommendations to the Alabama Board of Education for endorsement consideration.



## Program Participants

Students with significant disabilities may choose to participate in the Work Links Occupational Preparation Program if they have a post-school goal of employment, yet have chosen not to pursue the Alabama High School Diploma or the Alabama Occupational Diploma. Also, these students must be eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 105-17), and need limited or ongoing support in more than one major life activity in order to participate in integrated community settings. Support may be required for life activities such as mobility, communication, self-care, and learning, as necessary for independent living, employment and self sufficiency (adapted from The Association for Persons with Severe Handicap's definition of significant disabilities, 2002). In addition to meeting these general criteria, the students must also meet at least three of the following six eligibility requirements:

1. Students whose demonstrated cognitive ability and adaptive behavior prevents completion of the regular course of study even with program modifications and/or accommodations;
2. Students whose current adaptive behavior requires extensive direct instruction in multiple settings to accomplish the application and transfer of skills necessary in school, work, home, and community environments;
3. Students whose inability to complete the course of study is *not* a result of excessive or extended absences; or is *not* primarily the result of visual or auditory disabilities, specific learning disabilities, emotional-behavioral disabilities, or social/cultural/ economic differences;
4. Students who are unable to apply or use academic skills at a minimal competency level in natural settings (i.e. home, community, or work site) when instructed solely or primarily through school-based instruction;
5. Students who are unable to acquire, maintain, or generalize skills, and demonstrate performance without intensive, frequent, and individualized community-based instruction; and
6. Students who are unable to complete the regular Alabama Diploma program or Alabama Occupational Diploma even with extended schooling and program modifications and/or accommodations.

Of course, participation in this program should be considered and determined by each student's IEP Team, taking into account his or her preferences and interests, as well as considering his or her future employment outcomes and other post-school activities. It is suggested that students with significant disabilities receiving special education services enter Work Links by age 12 or no later than age 14. And, as with all special education services, this program option should be administered taking into account the individual needs of the student and the continuum of alternative placements and services that are available to students with disabilities (see Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provisions-Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) Section 612(a)(5) and Alabama Administrative Code Section 290-8-9-6.).

## Curriculum Certificate Framework

Work Links is a multilevel occupational preparation program that allows flexibility for student participation. There are four levels of performance standards, each of which have corresponding competencies and sub-competencies. Of the competency domains, six may be completed in

accordance with the individual performance level(s) of the student, as determined by his/her IEP Team. For full completion of the program, however, students must finish level four of the pre-vocational/vocational domain. Once again, the flexibility of this program allows for individual differences and abilities across the curriculum while maintaining specific requirements for vocational preparation.

The six Work Links competencies addressed in the program's course of study include specific classes in (a) motor skills, (b) self-care living skills, (c) socialization, (d) communication/sensory awareness skills, (e) pre-vocational/vocational, (f) pre-academics/academics, and (g) electives, for a possible total of 28 units. The fact is, however, that all students may not earn the total 28 units from the Work Links course of study. In other words, the attainment of the number of units will depend upon when a student entered the Work Links program and/or what content domains the student is receiving instruction in. The program will typically be completed in four years, but due to the variability in student performance, program flexibility allows teachers to expand the course of study to meet the needs of students entering the Work Links program.

The ability to meet individual needs in this program is demonstrated in the sample plan of study found in Table 1. In this example, the four-year plan of study for this student has him or her progressing from Level 1 in each class in year one to Level 2 for all classes in year two. Some students may not progress at this rate, however, and may need to remain in a Level for more than one year. The Work Links program allows for a very individualized plan of study while adhering to a prescribed set of curriculum standards.

The Work Links Occupational Preparation Certificate framework is composed of four levels of competencies with corresponding sub-competencies and objectives that are incorporated into the six content domain areas listed below:

- Communication/Sensory Awareness Skills
- Motor Skills
- Socialization
- Self-Care Living Skills
- Pre-Academics/Academics
- Pre-Vocational/Vocational

The competencies are broad descriptors that delineate areas of performance in each content domain discipline. The sub-competencies are more narrow and specific content areas from which a teacher will construct instructional objectives and select appropriate instructional activities to assist students to acquire these essential competencies. There are four performance levels for each content domain. These performance levels are intended to include those that are essential for students to develop skills for independence or semi-independence in pursuance of community integration and employment. While the four performance levels apply across the board for all Work Link students, each student's IEP team will determine whether accommodations or modifications are necessary for individual achievement, and how best to employ them for progress in attainment of competency levels.

YEAR 1					YEAR 2						
	Course			Level	Units		Course			Level	Units
	Fall	1.	Motor Skills		1		1		Motor Skills		2
2.		Socialization		1	1		Socialization		2	1	
		Communication		1	1		Communication		2	1	
3.		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		vary	1/2		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		vary	1/2	
4.	Pre-vocational (classroom)		1	1/2		Pre-vocational (classroom)		1	1/2		
Spring	1.	Self-Care Living Skills		1	1		Self-Care Living Skills		2	1	
	2.	Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		vary	1/2		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		vary	1/2	
		3.	Art		adapt	1		Art		adapt	1
	4.	Pre-vocational (classroom)		1	1/2		Pre-vocational (school)		2	1/2	
TOTAL UNITS (YEAR 1)					7	TOTAL UNITS (YEAR 2)					7

YEAR 3					YEAR 4							
	Course			Level	Units		Course			Level	Units	
	Fall	1.	Motor Skills		3		1		Physical Education		adapt	1
2.		Socialization		3	1		Socialization		4	1		
		Communication		3	1		Communication		4	1		
3.		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		vary	1/2		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		vary	1/2		
4.	Pre-vocational (community)		3	1/2		Pre-vocational (employment)		4	1/2			
Spring	1.	Self-Care Living Skills					*Self-Care Living Skills		4	1/2	1/2+1/2=	
	2.	Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		3	1/2		Health		adapt	1/2	1 unit	
		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		3	1/2		Pre-academics • Daily Living Math • Daily Living English • Daily Living Science • Daily Living Social Studies		4	1/2		
	3.	Theater		adapt	1		Theater		adapt	1		
4.	Pre-vocational (community)		3	1/2		Vocational (employment)		4	1/2			
TOTAL UNITS (YEAR 3)					7	TOTAL UNITS (YEAR 4)					7	Total 28 units

\* Self-Care Living Skills units: Students should progress through the self-care living skill levels 1, 2 and 3. Upon reaching level four students should take the general education or split class of level 4 self-care living skills and general health.

EACH content domain contains four levels of student performance:

Level 1	Foundation Performance Skills
Level 2	Prerequisite Performance Skills
Level 3	Functional Academic Performance Skills
Level 4	Functional Living Performance Skills

NOTE: (Work Links performance levels were derived from The Alabama Alternative Assessment.)

**Level 1:** Foundation Performance Skills are at the most basic levels of interaction with individuals or objects. They are foundational to future achievement.

**Level 2:** Prerequisite Performance Skills enable students to participate in simple interactions. They are prerequisites to basic functional independence within the home or school.

**Level 3:** Functional Academic Performance Skills allow participation in conventional and meaningful ways in simple academic and social interactions. They allow moderate functional independence in an educational setting.

**Level 4:** Functional Living Performance Skills relate to real-life activities and behaviors that are required for supported, limited support, or competitive employment and semi-independent living.

In the sample plan of study provided in Table 1, during the Fall of Year 1, this student is at Level 1 in Motor Skills. This would mean that the student would be working on three main competencies and 11 related subcompetencies within this domain throughout the year. Upon mastery of these competencies (and subcompetencies), the student will then move to Level 2 of the Motor Skills domain. Again, Level 1 represents a basic level of competence, Level 2 indicates functional independence, and Level 3 suggests a moderate functional independence. As the student progresses through the Levels in a given domain, he or she is continuing his or her skill development until the final Level 4 is reached in which the student can perform the competencies and related subcompetencies of that domain in real-life activities.

### Occupational Preparation Component

The vocational training portion of the Work Links program consists of classroom-based, school-based, community-based awareness and mentorship job experiences.

**Level 1:** *Classroom-Based Job Experiences (in-classroom-based jobs).* The purpose of the classroom-based job experience is to provide students with an opportunity to learn pre-vocational skills in a controlled and supported environment. The classroom, therefore, should be structured as a simulated job site.

**Level 2:** *School-Based Job Experiences (school-based jobs).* The purpose of the school-based job experience is to provide students with a variety of real job experiences on the school campus.

This allows the students to further develop their pre-vocational skills with the assistance of school personnel.

**Level 3:** *Community-Based Job Awareness Experience (community-based jobs).* The intent of the community-based job awareness experience is to expose students to actual job sites, roles, and responsibilities. This further broadens the student's outlook for potential vocational opportunities in and around his/her community.

**Level 4:** *Community-Based Mentored Job Experiences (community-based jobs).* The intent of the community-based mentored job experiences is to expose students to a variety of community-based job sites that afford the student an opportunity to observe and perform job-related tasks that correspond to his or her career interests. Students in work training placements will be supervised by an employee from the local business (the mentor) and the student's special education teacher(s) and/or trained paraprofessional(s).

Upon completion of all four levels, the student's overall goal will be to obtain the *post-school outcome of employment*. To assist students in accomplishing this goal three transition service options should be taken into consideration. Students should have applied and become eligible for services from Vocational Rehabilitation before exiting high school. If the student is found ineligible for VR services and is age 21 years or younger, it is suggested that the student remain in high school until the IEP Team decides otherwise. Students desiring to remain in high school upon successful completion of the Work Links Occupational Preparation program will *not* be eligible for supported, limited support, or competitive employment wages through their local education agency (LEA). Opportunities for assistance in gaining supported, limited support, or competitive wages are available through VR Services. Students age 21 years or younger have the option of remaining in high school after successful completion of the Work Links Occupational Preparation program and continuing to receive special education services. This must be an IEP Team decision.

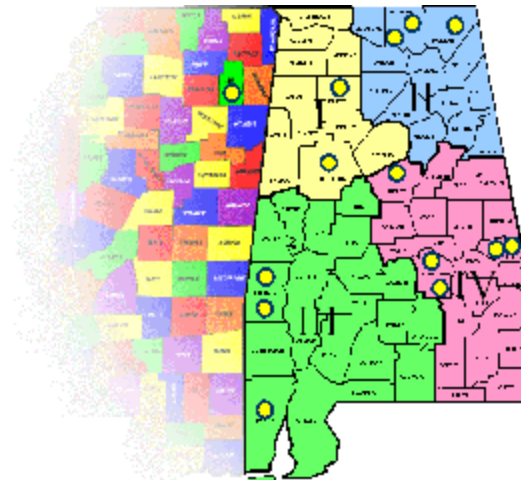
### **Program Completion**

The program exceeds the basic requirements of the "graduation certificate," and successful completion of the program will result in a student receiving a Graduation Certificate and Work Links Employment Inventory. This Employment Inventory is comprised of job experience documentation and evaluation performances and should be systematically gathered throughout the student's completion of the pre-vocational/vocational domains of Levels 1 - 4. In addition to the pre-vocational/vocational domain, each student, *depending upon individual performance levels and needs*, will take pre-academic/academic (math, science, English, and social studies) courses in conjunction with all other courses offered through Work Links.

Each student completing the program must have an approved work performance evaluation that contains evidence of the student's ability to be employable and live successfully in the community with support, or limited support. In addition to the functional courses within the occupational preparation program, students also have the opportunity to take career preparation courses that provide (a) Classroom-Based Job Experiences, (b) School-Based Job Experiences, (c) Community-Based Job Awareness Experiences, and (d) Community-Based Mentored Job Experiences. At level four of the pre-vocational/vocational domain, students are provided with job development and job placement services in order to gain skills necessary for supported,

limited support, or for competitive wages. Local procedures should provide for employment with flexibility to implement the program, yet ensure accountability for meeting standards, as evidenced by the student's job performance evaluation.

Students enrolled in the Work Links Occupational Preparation Program may not count units earned in this program toward an Alabama High School Diploma, or the Alabama Occupational Diploma. A student enrolled in the program of study leading to the Alabama High School Diploma (academic diploma), or the Alabama Occupational Diploma (occupational diploma), may switch to the Work Links Occupational Preparation Program at any time between the ages of 14 - 21 or younger, if appropriate, with their earned units being applied toward the Work Links Occupational Preparation Program. If a student chooses to switch to the Work Links Occupational Preparation Program in their last year of special education services eligibility period, regardless of the number and type of units previously earned, the student must meet the Level 4 pre-vocational/vocational domain requirements to complete the Work Links Program and receive Work Links Employment Inventory. This may require the student to take additional coursework and/or participate in a community-based mentored job experience. Each decision must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.



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## **An Evaluation Program**

### **Demonstration Pilot Sites**

The demonstration pilot sites were selected for participation in this project according to the following criteria: (a) public high school or middle school providing special education services to students between the ages of 12 - 21 with significant disabilities, (b) the school's geographic location, and (c) the school's community demographic information with respect to geographic location. As shown on the map, Alabama's school systems have been divided into four regions with an additional region added for this project (region v = Mississippi). As graphically depicted by the map, these five regions constitute the location of the 11 pilot sites (Region I = Northwest, Region II = Northeast, Region III = Southwest, Region IV = Southeast, Region V = Mississippi Outreach). In addition to geographic location, there is a representation of the community's demographics (i.e, Urban = >25,000 county population and Rural = <25,000 county population).

### **Three Modes of Data Collection**

There will be three types of data collection for this study, including (a) Instructional Practices, (b) Vocational Skill Development, (c) Participants' Satisfaction. The purpose of the first type, instructional practices review, is to examine the degree of correlation between the Work Links Curriculum and the teachers' transition instructional practices as indicated by the teachers' lesson plans and their students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The review of lesson

plans will provide, among other things, information on the instructional topic areas and the average amount of time allocated to teaching each topic during an academic year. The second area, vocational skills development, will be measured by using the *Work Links Student Performance Rating Form*. This form can be used for initial placement, IEP review, progress reports, reevaluation, and assessment. Finally, all participants will be asked to complete a participant satisfaction questionnaire at specified time periods during this study. Teachers and paraprofessionals will complete a *Work Links Instructor Questionnaire* to evaluate their satisfaction with the program. Students and parents will complete *Work Links Student Questionnaires* and *Work Links Parent Questionnaires* in order to determine their satisfaction with the program. The student and parent questionnaires include questions in the following areas: curriculum instruction, content, specific content domains, student assessment, curriculum difficulty and student participation.

### Summary

In summary, Work Links provides the needed structure and standards to provide students with significant disabilities with an occupational preparation program designed to meet their present and future needs. The program's foundation is based upon community referenced experiences, age appropriate and person centered planning and outcome oriented goals. This multi-level educational preparation program is based on, but not limited to, the following components: (a) functional curriculum, (b) multidisciplinary implementation, and (c) interagency collaboration. The ultimate goal of this program is for students with significant disabilities to develop the necessary skills for independence/ semi-independence in community integration and employment.

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