

Lesson Two: Cultivating the Next Generation of Qualified Workers

Successful companies know that meeting the growing need for talented employees in the next 10 years means educating students with the right skills now. Educators play an important role in connecting people with disabilities to employers. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services' (OSERS) Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) works with OSERS' Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and with state education agencies to prepare students with disabilities for higher education, employment and independent living. OSEP also requires schools across the country to establish transition curricula, which include community work-based learning experiences for youths with disabilities. By partnering with schools to offer work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities, your business can help create a pipeline of future employees who are knowledgeable and trained for jobs in your organization. These work-based learning opportunities may include the following:

- ✓ **Apprenticeships**—On-the-job training and related classroom instruction provides students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the practical and theoretical aspects of highly skilled occupations. Joint employer and labor groups, individual employers and employer associations sponsor apprenticeship programs.
- ✓ **Career academies**—Schools create a personalized and supportive learning environment for students with disabilities by combining academic and career-related competencies organized into small learning communities.
- ✓ **Internships**—While spending time in a business, industry or other organization, students with disabilities gain insight into and direct experience with different types of work environments. Internships can be paid or unpaid.
- ✓ **Job shadowing and mentoring days**—These activities are designed to allow students with disabilities to “shadow” or observe workplace mentors as they go through a normal day on the job. Job shadowing and mentoring provide students with disabilities a realistic look at the workplace.

- ✓ **School-based enterprises**—Tapping into entrepreneurial talents, students with disabilities organize into a group to produce goods or services for sale. Your success as a business leader places you in a position to offer advice to these future entrepreneurs.
- ✓ **Service learning**—Students with disabilities expand their horizons by combining meaningful community service with academic learning, personal growth and civic responsibility.

Work-based learning experiences can help students with disabilities prepare to enter your workforce and

- ✓ develop positive work attitudes and behaviors;
- ✓ learn general workplace readiness skills as well as job-specific skills;
- ✓ identify necessary work accommodations and supports;
- ✓ gain exposure to diverse working environments;
- ✓ apply practical theories learned in the classroom to your business;
- ✓ clarify and get excited about their career choices; and
- ✓ network with potential employers.

No Child Left Behind and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* work together to give students with disabilities the educational foundation they need to be productive employees. This preparation is making a difference for our young people. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, shows that in 2003, 70 percent of students with disabilities who had been out of school for up to two years had paying jobs, compared to only 55 percent in 1987.

Work-Based Learning: A Win-Win Experience

Employers benefit from work-based learning experiences as well. Companies that institute mentoring, job-shadowing, apprenticeship and internship programs learn firsthand how people with disabilities can contribute. Businesses discover that working and interacting with employees with disabilities raises morale and eliminates the mystery of workplace accommodations. Positive experiences with students dispel the fears that employers have about giving people with disabilities a chance in full-time employment. Most importantly, businesses that implement these programs cultivate their next generation of qualified workers and attract new customers.

Lesson Two: Strategies

The strategies listed below are some of the ways you as an employer can get involved in creating work-based learning opportunities for people with disabilities in your community.

Strategy 1:

Connect with your local schools by:

- ✓ helping schools and career counselors identify competencies, both personal and technical, that students with disabilities will need in the workplace;
- ✓ instituting mentoring and internship opportunities to place students in your company-sponsored programs;
- ✓ using your business connections to provide schools with instructors in specific professional and technical fields who can work with special education and VR professionals in your community;
- ✓ assisting schools and special education coordinators to develop curricula and instructional plans that prepare students with disabilities for jobs in the local market;
- ✓ providing assistance to students who want to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors; and
- ✓ advising educators and counselors of the future skill needs of your workforce.

To assist you in completing this strategy, locate local high schools in your area by contacting your state education agency through the Education Resource Organizations Directory (EROD) at http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm?category_cd=SEA, or locate your special education director by contacting the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) at www.nasdse.org.

Strategy 2:

Connect with your local community colleges and universities.

When you recruit at colleges and universities, indicate to the career office that you have an interest in recruiting students with disabilities. To provide work-based learning experiences to college students with disabilities, reach out to colleges or universities.

Strategy 3:

When you attend school-sponsored open houses and job fairs, provide recruiting materials in accessible formats, make sure interviewing locations are accessible, and be sure your Web site is accessible to people with disabilities. For more information, visit the Job Accommodation Network at <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu>.

Strategy 4:

Serve as a mentor to students with disabilities. Contact your local CIL (www.ilusa.com/links/ilcenters.htm) to identify possible opportunities or contact the American Association of People with Disabilities (www.aapd-dc.org) to find out how your business can participate in the annual National Disability Mentoring Day in October.

At Cingular Wireless, accessibility is more than a word—it's a commitment to ensure equality in our workforce and convenience for our employees and customers with disabilities. Increased accessibility and usability of our products is good business for everyone. From our participation in annual Disability Mentoring Day and our strategic alliances with national disability organizations whose leaders compose our Wireless Access Task Force, to our leadership in the creation of our National Call Center for Customers with Disabilities, ... our efforts are raising the bar across a variety of sectors. Our 2003 New Freedom Initiative Award presented by U.S. Department of Labor Secretary Elaine Chao was a tremendous honor, and a great recognition of our efforts toward inclusion of people with disabilities in all facets of our business.

— Bob Reed
Vice President, Diversity and Inclusion
Cingular Wireless

