

Summer Employment for Youth

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Anyone who has ever been told that they need to have work experience to get a job will recognize the value of a summer work experience program for students who are visually impaired. Many such students graduate from high school or college with no work experience and consequently have great difficulty obtaining their first job after graduation. Cacich and Dosch (1983) stated explicitly that a summer work experience program is an integral component of a total rehabilitation program for blind and visually impaired students. The benefit of such work experience or transition programs has been clearly documented (Bateman, 1975; Hoyt, 1976; Jeppson, 1990; Kirkman, 1985; & Wurster, 1983). Simpson (1985) discussed this need and examined four successful transition programs in Massachusetts, California, New York, and Texas.

This article describes the beginning of Summer Work Experience Program (SWEP), which the Texas Commission for the Blind (TCB), the Dallas Independent School district (DISD), and Dallas County Human Services jointly developed in Dallas in 1989. For full-time summer employment students were paid \$3.80 per hour from funds Dallas County received for its Summer Youth Employment and Training Program under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA).

During the summer of 1989, 17 blind and visually impaired youth from Dallas County, ages 14 through 18 participated in SWEP. The program doubled in 1990, and we accepted applications from 11 counties in addition to Dallas County. The data in Tables 1 and 2 show the visual acuity and ethnic backgrounds of students in the two programs.

Preparation for the program started in the spring, when students and itinerant vision teachers completed a referral form. The information on this form was ex-

Table 1. Visual Acuity of Students in SWEP

Visual acuity	1989	1990
Totally blind	4	7
Legally blind	9	20
Visually impaired	4	6
Total	17	33

Table 2. Ethnic Background of Students in SWEP

Ethnic background	1989	1990
Caucasian	7	16
Black	6	10
Hispanic	4	6
Asian-American	—	1
Total	17	33

tremely helpful because it noted the functional limitations of the students and the kinds of jobs that they were interested in pursuing. The form requested information about any needed adaptive devices and about access to transportation.

Students and their parents then attended an orientation session, and Dallas County certified the students as eligible for JTPA funds. The orientation session helped to inform the parents and students of what working in the program would entail, allowed the professional staff, parents, and students to begin a working relationship, and helped lay the ground work for communication between agencies and families involved in the summer program. Workshops, which were fun and encouraged creativity, were conducted on issues such as job interviews, grooming, proper behavior on the job, and employer expectations.

Staff from TCB, DISD, and Dallas County developed jobs at nonprofit organizations in the students' local communities that reflected the students' abilities and interests. Each employer was given an employer orientation packet along with a commitment that SWEP staff would help monitor the student's performance.

In 1990, we utilized the same employers and added to the list. Some 1990 sites were "for profit" organization; the students obtained employment on their own, and the employers, not JTPA, paid the salaries. This was encouraged as it promoted greater independence and was more "true to life." Students had jobs such as receptionist, clerk, computer operator, janitor, assembler, packager, child care giver, patient attendant, recreation aid, media aid, sales clerk, food service worker, teacher's aide, usher, and landscaper.

The students were expected to be at work on time, not be absent, and perform in a suitable manner. The employers expected the visually impaired student's work to be comparable to that of sighted persons working at the same job. Staff from TCB and DISD met with the students during the first week on the job and thereafter as often as was necessary to help make the job placement a success. These meetings dealt with such issues as orientation and mobility, transportation,

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job modification, and appropriate behavior on the job. Students were also supervised by a staff person from Dallas County who picked up their time cards, monitored their work, and paid their salaries. Throughout the summer, the County provided seminars to students on self-esteem, motivation, job retention skills, and similar topics.

The program concluded with a luncheon and discussion attended by students, parents, employers, and service providers. The parents appreciated the program and felt that their children made great progress during the summer. Students felt great about their pay checks and indicated that they had gained much experience and were proud of their accomplishments. The employers were glad that they participated and agreed to accept students in subsequent years. They stated that these youth acted and performed as well as the nondisabled youth that they had employed.

We encountered a few problems during our project. Locating jobs that were close to the students was a challenge. Some of the students had difficulty overcoming their shyness in order to communicate effectively with the employer. In those cases, rehabilitation teachers intervened to help students to overcome shyness and to be more vocal on the job. Two of our students needed low vision aids to function adequately. Once the devices were obtained, the students did well on their jobs. In 1990 a student was fired for poor work habits, an event that taught him the consequences of his inappropriate behavior. Suddenly he was without the income he was counting on. After some counseling, he could acknowledge his problem and was placed in a less desirable, more structured work adjustment type setting where his performance was closely monitored. He has made a big step in preparing for life after graduation.

We consider that the success of the program was due in part to the high level of commitment of the staff members involved in the planning and coordination. Although success can be measured by the number of students placed in summer jobs and its expansion in the second year, the real measure is in the impact of the program on the lives of the students, their families, and the employers. We believe that the students will be more successful in the transition between school and work as a result of having one or more years of summer work during high school.

The Dallas Independent School district has made a video of the program that includes interviews with students and employers on their jobs. It will be used to develop participation by additional employers and to inform others about the program.

Summer employment will be an ongoing project in Dallas. Following the 1990 summer program, the Texas Commission for the Blind hired a full time transition coordinator to coordinate SWEP, conduct workshops, assist students in obtaining after school employment, and provide general vocational rehabilitation services to high school students in the Dallas area.

Throughout Texas and in other states summer work programs are being developed. This model or similar ones could be used to meet the needs of students in a variety of localities.

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