



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK / ALBANY, NY 12234

**TO:** Adult Career and Continuing Education Services (ACCES)  
and P-12 Education Committees

**FROM:** Kevin G. Smith *Kevin G. Smith*  
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**SUBJECT:** Panel on Peer Mentoring Services for Students with  
Disabilities

**DATE:** October 4, 2018

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## SUMMARY

### Issue for Discussion

To provide the Board of Regents with information on Department initiatives to improve employment outcomes for students and youth with disabilities.

### Reason(s) for Consideration

Provide an update on the collaboration between Adult Career and Continuing Education Services Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR) and the P-12 Office of Special Education (OSE), including information on the Peer Mentoring Initiative that has been successful in assisting students and youth with disabilities in navigating through barriers to employment.

### Proposed Handling

This item will come before the Board of Regents in a joint presentation to the ACCES and P-12 Education Committees at their October 2018 meeting.

### Procedural History

In July 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law. Final regulations were issued in August 2016. The Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) requires school districts to provide transition planning and services to prepare students with disabilities for post-school living, learning, and working. In New York State, transition planning and services must be included in the student's individualized education program beginning with the school year in which the student turns age 15, or younger, if appropriate.

### **Background Information**

Both ACCES-VR and OSE have significant roles in the transition planning and services for students with disabilities. While IDEA places responsibility for transition planning and services on school districts, WIOA and its implementing regulations also include requirements to promote vocational rehabilitation and independent living services during a youth's transition planning years.

Over the last five years, ACCES-VR has directed a significant increase in youth (age 14-24) on its caseload. Between Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2013-14 and FFY 2016-17, ACCES-VR's caseload consisted of 58,662 individuals of which 55 percent were youth. OSE and ACCES-VR have been working together to facilitate and foster a common understanding of transition requirements and responsibilities, and to build a partnership to enable students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR services to successfully transition from school to post-school activities.

As part of this collaborative effort, OSE and ACCES-VR have been working on a joint agreement to:

- strengthen shared efforts to prepare students with disabilities for successful community work experiences, careers, and independent living;
- outline a collaborative framework for coordinating State and local services and resources; and
- provide guidance for coordinating plans, policies, and procedures developed to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from school to post-school activities, including the receipt of vocational rehabilitation services leading to employment.

Another strategy being used to improve employment outcomes for students and youth with disabilities has been ACCES-VR's Peer Mentoring Initiative. In 2016, the Peer Mentoring Initiative started as a pilot in the White Plains and Rochester District Offices to determine if peers with disabilities who have shared experiences with the ACCES-VR participant could impart knowledge and support that would assist ACCES-VR participants to overcome barriers to employment, including accessing health care, housing, public benefits, child care, mental health treatment, transportation, etc. The peer would bring a unique perspective and insight to the challenges confronting the VR participant.

As part of the pilot, peer mentors from the local Independent Living Center were located within the two district offices, to provide peer mentoring and advocacy services to ACCES-VR participants. The peer mentors work with ACCES-VR participants who are

interested in work, but face obstacles in successfully completing services or navigating community supports that would make work sustainable. In addition, the peer mentors provide training each month to Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs), participants, and/or community partners.

The Peers promote self-reliance, recovery, self-advocacy, self-image and self-determination. Peers are typically engaged in providing social and emotional support, facilitating linkages to community resources and teaching essential skills in navigating systems and in areas of self-management. Peers are role models motivating others to learn compensatory skills, understand disability as a civil rights issue, and overcome the devaluing impacts of lowered expectations, poverty and discrimination.

At the close of year two, the pilot offices served a total 731 individuals with disabilities which exceeded the original goal of 400. Over 70 percent of the participants had a cognitive and/or mental health impairment. The ethnic and racial diversity of the participants was over 50 percent. The pilot helped students graduate from high school and pursue post-secondary education and career options, as well as support individuals with disabilities in obtaining affordable and accessible housing. The interventions through the Peer Mentoring Pilot were key to helping participants navigate their way through various obstacles and fully participate in the vocational rehabilitation process.

Due to the success of the initial pilot, work is currently underway to release a new Request for Proposals (RFP) to expand the project to a total of five District Offices.

### **Related Regent's Items**

[November 2017](#)

<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/1117p12accesd1.pdf>

### **Timetable for Implementation**

With support of the Board of Regents, the Department will continue to implement the above actions.