

New Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities



In June, the provincial government announced their new employment strategy for people with disabilities, [Access Talent](#). This strategy is of major interest to Easter Seals Ontario as we know that many children and youth with physical disabilities face unemployment or under-employment as adults. Research has shown that early attachment to the work force is an important indicator of employment success for adults with disabilities.

One of the four pillars of the government's employment strategy is:

- **Start early – inspire and support youth and students with disabilities.**

The key strategies in this pillar are:

- encouraging post-secondary education and future planning

- through enhanced career exploration at earlier ages
- piloting a person-centred case management approach in the Ontario Disability Support Program to help more young people with disabilities identify employment goals and actions
 - supporting the transition to workplaces, apprenticeships, college, or university before and after graduation from secondary school through stronger community partnerships and youth programming
 - expanding community-connected experiential learning opportunities for students in kindergarten to grade 12 and adult learners
 - helping colleges and universities support students with disabilities throughout their studies, with an early focus on students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

What does this mean for families of students with disabilities?

Career exploration and future planning at earlier ages. This means that we need to start talking about the future and life after high school, as early as possible. Decisions made about the Individual Education Plan (IEP) in grades 4 to 6 can have a big impact on credit selection and academic achievement at secondary school. In particular, the decision to modify the classroom program can have major implications. Modification of grade level curriculum, either by reducing the number or complexity of learning expectations or by using curriculum from a lower grade, can prevent a student from meeting curriculum expectations they need for secondary school credits. If a student is unable to obtain the credits they need for graduation or specific post secondary program it may impact their future employment goals.

This doesn't mean that your child needs to set their lifetime goals in the junior grades. Rather it means that you need to be aware of actions that can impact future decisions. It also means it is important to talk about future dreams and explore

career opportunities. A young teen that is interested in babysitting their siblings or children of their neighbours, may want to find out more about jobs with children ranging from early childhood educators, to teachers and therapists such as physiotherapist and speech-language pathologists. It is not about making decisions about the future but about understanding what is needed to get to the potential goal.

For students with disabilities there are even more issues to consider as they think about the future and potential careers. In addition to thinking about different careers, students with disabilities need to have a good understanding of their own abilities and challenges. As they grow and mature students should become more involved in decision making and start to provide input into their IEP. They are in the best position to know what works and which strategies are helpful in the classroom.

Person-centred planning. This means have the person with the disability at the centre of all decision making. For some families this can be a difficult adjustment. As parents our job is to keep our children safe and healthy. When a child has a disability we are forced to make all kinds of decisions about their care and education and it can be hard to let go. As a parent we need to support our child's development to adulthood and this means letting them make their own decisions and, sometimes, failing as they learn.

It make be as simple as offering two choices but eventually you want your child to have the confidence to be able to speak up and let you know what they want. This doesn't mean that we literally want a non-verbal person to start talking, but rather that we find ways for their voice to be heard. Starting with small decisions, young people will gradually develop the skills and confidence to make choices and to determine what they want to happen in their lives.

The importance of being self directed and making their own

choices can't be underestimated. Having some control and feeling competent are important to success in life and self esteem. Many people with significant disabilities, including developmental disabilities, live successful living and working in the community.

Supporting the transition out of high school. The government strategy is about all of the organizations that have a role in transition planning, including school boards, colleges and universities and employers. There is also an important role for parents.

Successful transition out of high school requires careful planning to make sure all of the supports are in place. As a parent you may want to do the planning and make the arrangements but it is critical that the student is involved and takes responsibility for as much of the planning as possible.

For students heading for college or university, this means the research on post-secondary programs, the accessibility and disability supports available at each college or university and on financial assistance. Parents can support their child in the process but at college and university your child is recognized as an independent adult and is expected to advocate for themselves. For more information on the differences between secondary school and post-secondary, check the article, [School to Post Secondary Point by Point Contrast](#),.

For students headed directly to employment there are also many issues to consider and supports to get in place. A good place to start is the Ontario Disability Support Program Employment supports. Students with disability can access this program at age 16, even though they may not be eligible for ODSP income support until they are 18 years old. For more information on ODSP and other employment supports, check the article [Getting Ready for Employment](#) on this website.

Cooperative education and community connected experiential learning experiences. The Ministry of Education has mandated that students be provided more opportunities for experiential learning (learning by doing) from Kindergarten to Grade 12. These experiences will help students to see more clearly the connections between the curriculum and real life.

Cooperative education and experiential learning is especially important for students with physical disabilities. Students with mobility, gross motor and fine motor difficulties generally have less experience in the community than their same age peers. There are many barriers to participation by students with significant disabilities but it is important that families advocate for their participation.

Barriers can include accessible transportation to get to job site; lack of available support personnel to provide personal care, or job coaching; or reluctance by the employer because of health and safety concerns. The new employment strategy provides clear direction that the community needs to work collaboratively to find solutions.

As a parent, you have a role in the collaborative team and you also have an additional role in supporting your child's involvement in the community outside of school hours.

Volunteer and employment experience during high school years are important in terms of developing skills, building experience and job force attachment. "The number one indicator for an adult with an intellectual disability to have successful job market attachment is whether they had a paid job in high school or not." Sources: Carter, E.W., Austin, D. & Trainor, A. (2012). ***Predictors of Post School Employment Outcomes for Young Adults With Severe Disabilities***. Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 23(1), 55-63.

Colleges and universities support for students with disabilities. Many colleges and universities offer supports for the transition to college and university. A few, like York

University, Carleton University and Algonquin College, offer summer or pre-enrollment programs that target specific groups, such as students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Learning Disabilities, physical disabilities or mental health disorders. For example, [Project Advance](#) at York University. Twenty one colleges offer the [Community Integration through Cooperative Education](#) (CICE) programs for students with developmental disabilities. These programs provide individualized support that enables students to obtain Certificates and develop skills and knowledge in various program areas.

The government's new employment strategy for people with disabilities contains many more ideas to enhance employment opportunities and for more details you can check the complete document [Access Talent](#). One of the key strategies is to encourage all employers to consider hiring a person with a disability. We all need to look around and see if there is an opportunity in our workplace, or in the community for someone looking for a chance. For more information on the myths that stop employers from considering people with disabilities, check the article, [Myths about Employing People with Disabilities](#) on this website.