



Establishing an Intra-University Alliance to Increase Early Career-Planning Opportunities for Students with Autism

**UNIVERSITY-
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ABSTRACT

The provision of early career transition services for students with autism, particularly during their middle school years, remains underresearched. Despite legislative action put into place by the Workforce Innovations Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014), there remains a lack of successful, evidence-based vocational interventions implemented within the public school setting. The purpose of this paper is to describe a unique partnership formed by two university technical assistance centers, a school district, and students and their families. Preliminary evaluations reveal that family, student, and public school participants are invested in this model and share the responsibility for facilitating meaningful work-based learning opportunities for students with autism based on their interests, strengths, and contributions to their home, school, and community.

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Despite education and employment legislation that focuses on improving transition services, post-school outcomes for students with disabilities remain unacceptable (Poppen et al., 2017; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). Compared to other federally-defined disability classifications (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004), students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) hold the highest rate of no post-high school activities and the highest unemployment percentage. Students with ASD have Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition goals that likely require assistance or employment in a non-competitive setting (Roux et al., 2018; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). ASD is defined as “a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child’s educational performance” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Research indicates over one-fourth of transition-aged youth with ASD were not provided with services to facilitate their path to employment between exiting high school and their early twenties. Therefore, they are more likely to be living with their parents and least likely to live independently (Roux et al., 2013). There are several reasons for these bleak post-school outcomes. They include: (a) a lack of student participation in transition planning (Roux et al., 2018); (b) a lack of participation of vital team members in transition planning (Kucharczyk et al., 2015); (c) a lack of ongoing communication between team members (Snell-Rood et al., 2020); and (d) the reliance on the students and their parents to create post-school opportunities (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). This article will provide a brief background on legislation and research regarding post-secondary transition for students with ASD, followed by a description of an intra-university partnership between two university-technical assistance centers, a school district, as well as students and their families. Further, the model used to facilitate these alliances is also explained.

BACKGROUND

Preliminary research and legislative efforts suggest that providing transition-focused education starting in middle school is more impactful in achieving meaningful long-term employment outcomes (Cimera et al., 2013; Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007). Focusing on transition in earlier school years provides for a comprehensive, ongoing, and thorough process to identify a student’s strengths, for additional information to be shared between middle and high school educators, and for increased coordination between service providers. Students with disabilities, as with all students, need to obtain a wide range of skills, knowledge, and abilities to successfully transition into post-secondary activities

with the goal of competitive, integrated employment or a prospective career pathway. The emphasis on post-school preparation has led to several school reform movements that have created high academic standards and learning goals for all students with and without disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Two crucial pieces of legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act (2004) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2016), provide a foundation for early career planning and interagency collaboration among public and private entities. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the guidance provided within both legislative actions that specifically prepare transition-aged youth with ASD, during which comprehensive educational services are in place. While served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), students with ASD can receive systematic and results-oriented services based on each student’s needs, strengths, interests, and family values. Minimally, this legislation provides a framework for students with disabilities to receive coordinated transition assessment and transition-related instruction incorporated into the IEP. Developing a transition plan and associated goals within the IEP begins no later than 16 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Given the significantly poor transition outcomes for students with ASD, transition assessment is not targeted during school years and is not sufficient (Tullis & Seaman-Tullis, 2019).

The comprehensive special education services received in elementary and secondary school often is not available in most post-secondary settings (Rast et al., 2020). New workforce initiatives for vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies were established in 2016, as part of the updated regulations in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014), to strengthen career planning efforts for students and youth with disabilities while still in public education. The act enables VR counselors to engage in early career planning with all students with disabilities by significantly changing eligibility requirements for early transition services available from VR. For instance, the specific provisions and guidance pertaining to pre-employment transition services provides opportunities for the development and implementation of the innovative delivery of VR services to students with the most significant disabilities (Roux et al., 2020). As a state agency, the legislation outlines the required activities in providing pre-employment transition services to minimally include: (a) job exploration counseling; (b) integrated work-based learning experiences provided in-school or after-school; (c) workplace readiness training; and (d) self-advocacy instruction (Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, 2014).

To improve the transition experiences of school-aged youth with ASD, two university centers, Virginia

Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence (ACE) and Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Transition Innovations (CTI), combined capacity-building efforts with one participating school district. These efforts focused on training transition professionals in facilitating early, individualized transition planning and training behavior specialists to execute co-created work-based learning opportunities within the school setting. In the initial planning stages, the school district's special education leadership team co-constructed a guiding question alongside the intra-university trainers: What capacity-building features of the intra-university partnership facilitate improvements in early transition outcomes for students with ASD across home, school, and community?

LEVERAGING EXISTING COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

This section outlines the origination of the need for two university centers to co-create knowledge related to the facilitators and barriers associated with leveraging ACE's existing school-university partnership with one region consisting of 15 school districts. This partnership aimed to increase strengths-based early transition services

to students with ASD who typically experience limited access to work-based learning opportunities. Table 1 summarizes the main features of each university partner in this mutual school-university project.

The ACE partnership sought to foster school and community ownership of students with ASD who require significant home, school, and community assistance. This partnership originated with the superintendents and special education directors, who identified the need for a professional development consortium. Supported by a state grant and local school district funding, the executive leadership team, consisting of ACE leaders and special education directors, created regional and individual school district goals to address the needs of their students with ASD who require significant assistance to be successful in their home school district. One of these school-university developed goals included reducing the number of students with ASD who were being referred to out-of-district placements for communication needs and the level of behavior support required.

ACE met with CTI to investigate their early career services model for students with autism in a regional middle school program to combat this concern. A regional program serves students with the most significant behavioral support needs within their own school district or a neighboring school district, in the event that the student

	CENTER ON TRANSITION INNOVATIONS (CTI) "DISCOVERING ME!" MODEL	AUTISM CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE (ACE) "CUSTOMIZED BEHAVIOR APPLICATION TRAINING"
Project Rationale	Need for increased early transition services provided to students with disabilities Limited community and parent involvement with transition services at the middle school level Lack of training for transition professionals in identifying strengths-based, work-based learning via iterative processes, which includes stakeholder feedback throughout the meeting process	Need for a student-centered, strengths-based process to increase the involvement of the individual and their family in intensive, school-based behavioral programming Limited work-based learning opportunities for students with ASD who engage in interfering behaviors to get their needs met, and often have limited functional communication
Roles in Partnership	Train ACE technical assistance providers as trainers of the Discovering ME! (DM!) process to expand reach across multiple school districts Coach district level transition teachers in independently facilitating meeting process, establish community partner involvement, and interface with school community and families for work-based learning opportunities Co-create knowledge on the facilitators and barriers to aligning university partners within the same school districts	Co-facilitate early transition planning alongside the school district leadership team based on CTI training mechanisms to assure quality of implementation Serve as a liaison between CTI and school district leadership to establish sustainable, ongoing implementation of transition instructional practices Coach behavior specialists on behavioral assessments and interventions to increase school and community opportunities for the individual to engage in strengths-based, work-based learning opportunities
Goals of Project Related to Capacity Building	Establish trained ACE staff and district level transition teachers who can independently facilitate DM! process and establish trust among several stakeholders, including the student and family	Establish trained behavior specialists as participants and implementers to increase early transition service opportunities for students with ASD and their families
Project Partnership Expectations	Meet regularly with ACE and school district staff to evaluate training and guidance needed for the district to increase capacity for DM! implementation	Regularly coach behavior specialists to work with the regional classroom teacher to implement the work-based learning opportunities of each student utilizing behavioral assessment, intervention, and monitoring

Table 1 School-University Partnership Roles of CTI and ACE.

cannot be served safely in their home school district. The regional program resided within a comprehensive public middle school in this instance. Within this regional program, many of the middle school students are susceptible to out-of-district placement, leading to out-of-community placement or unsuccessful reintegration into the student's home and community after high school. This regional program is structured to accommodate students with autism across 15 school districts in the event that a similar continuum option is not available within their home school district. A customized, student-centered planning framework, such as the one developed by CTI, was a necessity to establish strong parent-school trust, establish a systematic plan for transitioning a student back to their home school or home school district, as well as facilitate early career opportunities across home, school, and community for these students.

Consequently, ACE connected with CTI met to discuss possible models to offer an early career planning experience to students with autism participating in the middle school regional program. Before selecting an early career planning model, the two university centers met with the school district to complete a districtwide transition self-assessment. The transition self-assessment assisted the school district in evaluating existing early transition programs and services, transition outcomes by state indicators, and current training for transition and other professionals expected to provide these services. Based on the results of the district self-assessment, CTI, ACE, and the participating school district strategically identified Discovering Me! (DM!) as the early career transition planning model to address the need for a customized, student-centered planning. CTI established a collaborative agreement with the school district that outlined the expectations of the school district and CTI, similar to how ACE and CTI clarified roles and responsibilities.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCOVERING ME! MODEL

DM! is a youth-focused, student-centered transition assessment and career planning process designed to build early customized work-based learning experiences that can lead to future employment and community integration. It is intended for students with disabilities who have the most significant barriers to competitive integrated employment and incorporates identified predictors of post-school success. DM! provides a process of how to implement portions of employment service models in schools, particularly in middle schools, through emphasizing parent and student input, involvement of public school and private agency service providers, as well as identifying work-based learning experiences in school settings (Noonan et al., 2008).

CTI, a university-based, state-sponsored transition-focused center at Virginia Commonwealth University's Research and Rehabilitation Training Center, customized the DM! model. The CTI recognized the need to develop a school-based early career exploration process to match middle and high school students who experience significant barriers to education, employment, and community integration, with inclusive opportunities within their schools, home, and communities. To develop the DM! model, CTI revised the Discovery process, an alternative approach to matching adult job seekers with significant disabilities to employment opportunities (Callahan, Shumpert, Condon, & Mast, 2009). As part of a national technical assistance effort, Marc Gold and Associates' consultants provided CTI technical assistance providers training within two schools, focusing on Discovery as a path to customized employment (Condon & Callahan, 2008). While this pedagogy designed for adult job seekers was successful with youth ready to graduate, it was difficult to translate to younger children needing early career training interventions. As a result, DM! was designed to help school district transition teachers support students and their families in planning for students' futures. Additionally, DM! provided critical information that teachers, families, and agency personnel could use to build employment skills throughout the school-aged years. This early transition planning model empowers students to practice their self-advocacy skills and invites influential school and community members into students' immediate and long-term network of support. This approach is a model for educational and pre-employment transition services called for under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) that begins in middle school, transitions to high school, and eventually, post-school employment.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR SUCCESS IN EARLY TRANSITION SERVICES

As part of the statewide technical assistance scope of work, there was a natural fit to adopt the DM! model to aid students with ASD to receive early transition planning services. The DM! model is the first step in addressing many issues surrounding a student's access to inclusive school and community opportunities. The frequency and intensity of interfering behaviors often hinder a student's access to academic and social opportunities and early career planning, thus limiting work-based learning opportunities. Using a robust teaming component, DM! served as a mechanism to strengthen the technical assistance provided to one school district by two different university centers with the same mission—to ensure the customized inclusion of middle school students with ASD in their home, school, and community. The consistent

evidence of poor post-school outcomes for individuals with ASD calls for promising models to address this issue in the school-age years, which are critical for shaping school, community, and family expectations (Noonan et al.; Wehmeyer et al., 2018).

Another fundamental component of DM! is the train-the-trainer method that assists school district transition teachers in learning the process for facilitating early career planning during middle school. CTI implemented a three-phase train-the-trainer approach with a focus on building capacity and sustaining this model district-wide: (1) intensive modeling and coaching; (2) consulting; and (3) follow along. Typically, each phase is targeted to occur over a year, which can be influenced by the participation of school, community, university, and family stakeholders. For the first stage, CTI facilitated the meetings and collaborated with the school district's transition teacher, regional classroom teacher, and behavior specialist to collect information and data and to work with families to secure opportunities within the home, school, and community. In the second stage, the school district transition teachers facilitate meetings with intermittent technical assistance. Lastly, the school district transition teachers take ownership of the process and lead the initiative within schools for selected students. For this school district, the plan was to extend beyond the regional classroom by using this model with other students with disabilities besides autism. The school district selected students to participate in the DM! pilot based on limited previous or existing early transition opportunities and placement within the middle school regional classroom or the general education classroom with supplemental special education services within the same comprehensive public middle school. Throughout the planning stages, the school district stakeholders are integral team members to ensure the transition-focused initiative's successful implementation, evaluation, and long-term sustainability.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DISCOVERING ME! MODEL

The transition assessment and planning process are executed through a series of three team meetings followed by the implementation of individualized action plans. The model consists of three meetings focusing on: (1) collecting student information; (2) building opportunities in the home, school and community; and (3) exploring careers. The meeting process emphasizes an iterative planning process between students, family members, school staff, and agency representatives to capture foundational elements of the student's identity as a future employee and unique individual. Team members include those who know the student well and want to support their life planning. The configuration

of teams reflects the uniqueness of the student, but it is mandatory that these teams include the student, family members, school representatives, and community agency partners as often as possible.

After obtaining consent and assent from students and their families, the school district scheduled three meeting dates for the first year of implementation. Families were provided with advance notice to attend and invite other team members. During this pilot project, the first stage of the train-the-trainer approach (e.g., intensive modeling and coaching) was implemented by the two university centers to coach district transition teachers to co-facilitate the first year meetings with selected students with autism participating in the middle school regional program. The three-meeting process is described below as it relates to the capacity-building features of the school-university partnership.

COLLECTING STUDENT INFORMATION (MEETING 1)

The first meeting of DM! is devoted to learning about the student through facilitated discussions and conversations among the student's team members. The CTI technical assistance provider paired with the school district transition teacher to interview the student, their family members, the regional classroom teacher, the behavior specialist, and ACE technical assistance providers about the student's routines, supports, responsibilities, interests, past successes, and past challenges. Often, additional team members are identified at this meeting (e.g., community agency representation) as one of the first questions asked is the student and family's connection to outside agencies for assistance. After the interview information is collected, it is summarized into four major categories that comprise the Foundation Information one-pager. They are: (1) strengths/contributions (personal characteristics or traits, talents, skills, and ways in which the student helps others); (2) interests (what the student enjoys doing, what they want to learn more about); (3) conditions for success (under what conditions is the student most successful and will thrive, as well as the conditions which will present unfavorable behaviors or outcomes); and (4) challenges (e.g., academic, social, behavioral, or sensory nuances that will present obstacles to participating in employment or community opportunities). After the meeting, the two university providers, the school district transition teacher, and the school district behavior specialist transferred the interview answers into the four foundation information one-pager sections to ensure accuracy. The school district transition teacher provided the completed one-pager to the regional classroom teacher to share with the student and their family to review.

CTI focused on coaching the school district transition teacher to facilitate the meeting, assist in obtaining needed information, and ensure the accuracy of the

iterative products developed at the first meeting. ACE ensured that the school district behavior specialist helped the regional classroom teacher provide any additional observation data or information related to the student's preferences. Both capacity-building efforts instill the notion that each school district professional will be able to implement this process independently and for any student.

BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE HOME, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY (MEETING 2)

The second meeting centers on two major activities. The first is informally assessing the student's workplace readiness skills and the second is building customized work-based learning experiences. Workplace readiness skills are needed across employment levels and environments (Wehmeyer et al., 2018). Skills related to work ethics, teamwork, problem-solving, and self-representation are just a few of these essential readiness skills. CTI's technical assistance provider assists the school district transition teacher to facilitate a discussion around completing an informal strengths/needs assessment of 18 workplace readiness skill areas. Next, each group of team members builds a potential opportunity to address a workplace readiness area. Utilizing the foundation information one-pager, the team evaluates the opportunity based on the student's conditions for success and specific challenges identified in the first DM! meeting. For instance, the student and their family may design an opportunity for increasing independence. In this example, the student enjoys cooking and assisting the family in meal prepping; so, CTI and the transition teacher assisted the family in building an opportunity for the student to meal prep for their lunch and dinners. Next, the regional classroom teacher and behavior specialist mention that the student likes to organize and replenish classroom supplies. The family members mention a connection to a food pantry. ACE and the behavior specialist build an opportunity to work with the regional classroom teacher on how to teach the student to learn stocking skills within the classroom and transfer those skills into stocking within the middle school lunchroom. In each of these instances, team members create work-based learning experiences within the home and school that can convey to a community setting, such as the food pantry. Furthermore, CTI and ACE continue to build capacity in two school district professionals to increase the student's access to strengths-based opportunities within the school community.

EXPLORING CAREERS (MEETING 3)

Through the first two meetings in this model, the team collected the student's foundation information and used it to build opportunities for the individual, designed to strengthen their skills and further define their desires

and needs. The third meeting focuses on exploring possibilities of employment within 16 different career clusters identified by the state's education agency. The student and team are introduced to the career clusters, and through group discussion, the 16 career clusters are narrowed to three that best match the student's foundation information. The CTI facilitator and transition teacher separate the team into two or three groups. The student and their family members are dispersed amongst the groupings to ensure that the teams have community members, school members, and family members. The CTI facilitator and school district transition teacher give each team the student's foundation information one-pager and the informal assessment of workplace readiness skills to inform their career cluster decisions. Each group focuses on the student's strengths, ways they can contribute to others, and interests to explore possible clusters, while using conditions for success and challenges to identify the best match for future careers. Each group comes up with their top three career clusters, ensuring each team member has an equal voice in developing work-based learning experiences. Opportunities in the home, school, and community are then added to the student's early career profile that relate to the three chosen career clusters. The school district transition teacher works alongside the regional classroom teacher to ensure that this information is included into the IEP.

At the end of this first year of three meetings, school district team members are responsible for continuing to facilitate the student's participation in work-based learning opportunities designed during these meetings. Given the intra-university partnership, the model's second year focuses on transitioning leadership to the school district with consultation provided as needed by CTI. As stated earlier, the DM! model is an ongoing process intended to build a student's career profile based on successes and challenges during each work-based experience. CTI collects evaluation data at the beginning and end of each school year to assess the receptivity and acceptability of the DM! model across families, agencies, and the school team members. Additionally, ACE supports the behavior specialist in collecting discrete data on work productivity, independence, and rate of interfering behaviors while working.

CAPACITY-BUILDING FEATURES OF THE UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

The distinct intra-university partnership described contains many features that have implications for the provision of university technical assistance. Action research provided an opportunity to use an existing promising model, DM!, as a framework for this partnership while also addressing the needs of students with ASD who were often isolated and excluded from participating in

work-based learning opportunities due to the significant behavior support needed. In essence, this partnership valued each stakeholder—university, school, home, and community—and connected various hubs of expertise to address a critical educational problem (Home et al., 2021; Wood & McAteer, 2017). In this case, CTI and ACE were able to address the limited early transition planning opportunities for received by students with ASD impacted by significant interfering behaviors. In actuality, pilot data collected during the implementation of DM! revealed that the students participating in individualized, meaningful, work-based learning opportunities were less likely to engage in intensive behaviors during those experiences.

The train-the-trainer approaches deployed by both university centers naturally established school district and associated community agency ownership (Wood & McAteer, 2017). The funding infrastructures of this project are rooted both by state and local education agencies. The state funding mechanisms initiate the projects with support to use internal school funding streams to maintain and sustain meaningful efforts (Home et al., 2021). All participating entities invested the time in planning via the districtwide self-assessment and co-creating goals, roles, and expectations of each university and school district stakeholder.

Additionally, as a result of implementing the DM! model, the middle school's administration invited CTI to walk through the middle school to assist the school team in identifying work-based learning experiences for all students with disabilities, including those with autism and intensive behaviors. Furthermore, the DM! model strengthened the communication between the home and school, which facilitated more independence for the student in their home. The three meetings increased family investment and expectations in real work experiences and strengthened student outcomes based on accountability across school, university, and community agencies.

CHALLENGES ALLEVIATED BY INTRA-UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION

A critical feature of the intra-university partnership is establishing trust and a strong collegial relationship to enact change (Bengle et al., 2021). The established partnership between the school district and ACE was easily transferred to CTI. ACE had identified a need through co-planning with the target school district and pre-planned alignment of technical assistance efforts with CTI prior to implementing a new model within an existing professional development consortium. Additionally, CTI had a previous history of implementing the DM! framework in other school districts across the state, which provided implementation evidence to ACE and the school district. In ACE's regional needs assessment, families cited the lack of teaming

and communication between families and the public school entities for their children with intensive behaviors. Therefore, ACE saw CTI's DM! model as a remedy for this area of concern. Initial pilot survey evaluation data revealed that families and schools were receptive to this three-meeting process. The meeting tools provided by CTI assisted ACE and school district partners in linking tangible products to each meeting, as well as having an iterative action planning document to hold each stakeholder (e.g., representatives from home, school, and community) accountable throughout the process. The action planning tool and malleable structures allowed all stakeholders to have an equal voice in the process while also providing transparency.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

School-university partnerships seek to implement effective professional development efforts in real settings to remedy critical educational reform issues (Whitcomb et al., 2021). The DM! model provides a promising framework for intra-university partnerships to provide streamlined technical assistance that produces meaningful student outcomes and sustained programming at the district level.

Often, school districts are provided fragmented technical assistance services that pull from staff's time, limit the ability to implement successful practices well, and reinforce the idea of short-lived fad initiatives. The long-term impact of providing minimal early career services to students with the most significant challenges continues to project bleak employment statistics for these individuals. DM! provides a promising framework for establishing strong school-university partnerships that focus on meaningful student impact and outcomes using a team approach involving the home, school, and community.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Taryn Traylor is an Autism Consortium Coordinator at Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence. She provides training and technical assistance in Superintendent's Region 1 (Central Virginia) and Region 6 (Southwest Virginia) which are very distinct regions with different training support needs. Dr. Traylor has various experiences in developing and executing state and local programming to improve outcomes for students with autism and developmental disabilities. Her professional career has focused on increasing access to home, school, and community inclusion opportunities for students with autism and other disabilities. Taryn has a passion for serving others personally and professionally.

Lisa Holland (she/her)

As a transition professional employed by a research and technical assistance provider, Lisa Holland understands the importance of collaborative partnerships in helping people with disabilities achieve their postsecondary goals. As one of the developers of the Discovering ME! model, she had evidence of the effectiveness of this program in traditional transition planning, but wanted to understand how this model could be used to assist in the transition and successful integration of students returning to their community school after an out-of-district placement.

Whitney Ham (she/her)

Whitney Ham is a lifelong, professional learner with a strong interest in using her knowledge and experience to promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and significant support needs into society at large. With this interest comes an interest in training and collaborating with persons with different skill sets, experiences, and interests to develop goals and improve structures. Whitney is also a mother and wife and these identities have impacted her learning and professional priorities as well as necessitating a focus on identifying and living true to your values- regardless of your identity.

Elizabeth Getzel (she/her)

Elizabeth Evans Getzel is the Director of the VCU-RRTC on the Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities. She has been on the VCU faculty for over 30 years and has extensive experience directing research and demonstration projects. Her work has included supported education for college students with disabilities; transition of youth with disabilities to postsecondary education or employment; collaborative career planning for college students with autism; and postsecondary education supports for veterans with disabilities.

Karen Akom (she/her)

Dr. Akom has worked in the field of education for over twenty years. She believes that everyone has the ability to make a positive contribution to their community, and

that person-centered planning provides opportunities for educators, families, and service providers to see the potential in every student.

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