

GRANT PROFILE

COMMUNITIES OF FOCUS

Virginia Commonwealth University, Partnership for People with Disabilities aims to improve the transition outcomes of youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) in their state by enhancing collaborations across existing local systems. Specifically, the Virginia Community Collaborations for Employment (CCE) team is centering their CCE grant activities in two distinct school districts: Richmond and Colonial Heights. Both communities are in Central Virginia, although they vary in terms of population makeup and size; the student population in Richmond is approximately seven times larger than that of Colonial Heights, standing at 22,000 students compared to the 3,000 students in Colonial Heights. This variation is reflected in the community populations as well. While the Virginia CCE team hopes to improve outcomes for all youth with ID/DD in these communities, the team especially hopes to impact marginalized communities in Richmond, as this area has a higher Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) population. Additionally, the Virginia CCE team hopes to improve outcomes for youth with the greatest support needs in Richmond. The Virginia CCE team chose Richmond and Colonial Heights as their two communities of focus because each has innovative schools looking to improve outcomes for youth with ID/DD and distinct strengths, cultures, support systems, and businesses. By piloting activities in both, the Virginia CCE team hopes to develop a replicable transition plan and enhance employment outcomes while maximizing distinct community strengths.

GRANT RECIPIENT

Virginia Commonwealth University
Partnership for People with Disabilities

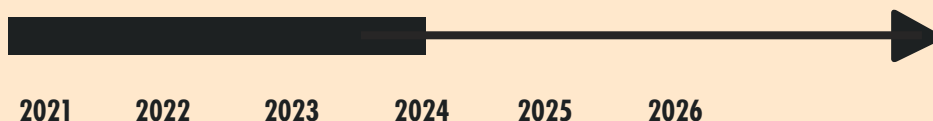
PROJECT TITLE

Project PEACE (Promoting Employment After high school through Community Expertise)

ABOUT THE CCE GRANTS

Among transition age youth with disabilities, employment is associated with improved health outcomes, increased quality of life, greater opportunities for socialization and relationship development, and a greater sense of belonging.¹ Yet, many students and youth with disabilities do not have the same opportunities as their peers without disabilities to pursue higher education, training, and careers. To address these disparities, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) issued CCE grants to increase and enhance collaborations across existing local systems in one or more communities. CCE grants aim to maximize a seamless experience and outcome of youth with ID/DD as they transition between school and post-secondary education or competitive integrated employment (CIE) in the community. ACL awarded seven five-year CCE grants starting September 30, 2021, and ending September 29, 2026, through its [Projects of National Significance program](#). This mid-term report summarizes grant activity through February 2024.

CCE Mid-Term Report and Grant Timeline



¹ Castruita Rios, Y., Park, S., Chen, X., & Tansey, T. N. (2023). Collaborations to Support Employment Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.52017/001c.72655>



VIRGINIA CCE PILOTS/COMMUNITIES (as of December 2023)

Community Name	Richmond	Colonial Heights
Estimated Total Population ²	22,000 students	3,000 students

OBJECTIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

The major goal of *Project PEACE* (Promoting Employment After high school through Community Expertise) is to increase and enhance collaborations across existing local systems to maximize a seamless experience and outcomes of youth with ID/DD as they transition between school and work in the community. To accomplish this goal, the Virginia CCE grant objectives are to:

1. Develop a replicable and sustainable community collaboration process to expand and strengthen local services available to youth with ID/DD and create CIE opportunities by developing and implementing a community employment transition plan;
2. Conduct and maintain a community landscape analysis, which will result in a dynamic document that will be modified to reflect the ongoing analysis process; and
3. Enhance each community's capacity to provide transition services and to facilitate improved transition activities.

To guide their project work, the Virginia CCE team is leveraging the [ABLE Change Framework](#), which consists of six major rules for guiding systemic change efforts. These six rules include engaging diverse perspectives, thinking systemically, incubating change, implementing change effectively, adapting quickly, and promoting social justice. The [community-based participatory research conceptual model](#), which leverages community expertise to avoid research practices that can harm traditionally marginalized communities, also guides the Virginia CCE team.

STATE AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Variations in youth transition outcomes occur, in part, due to varying demographic, economic, political, and historical factors in each state. The following factors provide valuable context for the external conditions in which the Virginia CCE team implements their grant.

² As reported by the Virginia CCE Team.



The Virginia CCE team intentionally selected two different communities to pilot their CCE grant. Although the populations of focus in both Richmond and Colonial Heights are youth with ID/DD, the demographics and geographic contexts vary. For example, Richmond is the capital of Virginia, and thus serves as a central hub for many transition employment services, supports, and programs that are also available across Virginia. Richmond is also an urban area, whereas Colonial Heights is suburban, and a much smaller community. The Richmond community is also more racially and ethnically diverse. This context informs the Virginia CCE team's grant approach in both communities; while lessons learned in their pilot in Richmond can inform approaches in Colonial Heights, whose pilot started later, the team still needs to consider specific contextual factors in designing their Colonial Heights pilot.

Beyond the diversity of their communities of focus, state and community-level factors influence the Virginia CCE grant. Virginia adopted a formal Employment First policy in 2012, making employment in the community the first and preferred option for individuals who receive state-funded services and supports. However, individuals with ID/DD continue to participate in unpaid, facility-based activities and non-work community activities at significantly higher rates than paid community-based employment.³ Individuals with more complex support needs face even more significant challenges, including a historical perception that they cannot work. Richmond Public Schools worked against this narrative by promoting more work-based learning opportunities for their students in recent years. The Virginia CCE grant model brings attention to the potential to shift collaborative practices (e.g., among families, schools, and vocational rehabilitation) in support of outcomes for youth with ID/DD, and there is interest from state agencies in bringing the CCE model to other communities across the state in the future.

GRANT ACTIVITIES BY STAGE



COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE PILOT

Each CCE grant established a community collaborative pilot – a broad range of diverse community partners involved in all aspects of the grant and representing stakeholders across developmental disabilities, education, advocacy, and employment settings.

Community Collaborative Structure

The Virginia CCE team designed their community collaborative structure around their two communities of focus in Richmond and Colonial Heights.

³ National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and the Human Services Research Institute. (2020). *National Core Indicators In Person Survey (IPS) State Report: 2018-2019*. National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and the Human Services Research Institute. Retrieved from https://legacy.nationalcoreindicators.org/upload/core-indicators/VA_IPS_state_508_6_26_2020.pdf.



► Full Community Collaboratives

The community collaborative in Richmond meets approximately monthly in a hybrid (in-person and virtual) format. In Colonial Heights, the team is in the early stages of developing a collaborative group, and the collaborative has not yet established a regular meeting schedule.

► Action Workgroup

The Virginia CCE team also created an action workgroup with a smaller subset of partners from the community collaborative throughout Richmond and Central Virginia. This action workgroup guides grant activity planning and consists of four major subgroups. The subgroups focus on training and technical assistance for special educators and transition professionals; business development for community business leaders and entrepreneurs; parent engagement with the Center for Family Involvement and cultural brokers; and collaboration with the EPIC⁴ grant, a project funded by the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services to prevent and ameliorate participation in sub-minimum wage work.

Community Collaborative Members, Roles, and Diversity

The Virginia CCE team is currently developing a collaborative group in Colonial Heights that will engage members from Colonial Heights Public Schools, the Arc South of the James, and the regional community service board. The community collaborative in Richmond includes parents, educators, and representatives from Richmond Public Schools. The Richmond collaborative also engages members from the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services as well as SOAR365, a Virginia nonprofit organization that provides services and supports to individuals with disabilities. The Center on Transition Innovations is a key partner, especially for training and capacity building for case managers, teachers, transition specialists, special education coordinators, and mentor teachers, among others. Overall, Richmond collaborative members are highly engaged in landscape analysis and transition plan activities, including in the promotion of community work-based learning opportunities for high school students with ID/DD. For example, Richmond Public Schools teachers helped facilitate the photovoice studies, while SOAR365 served as a key partner in implementing the Transition Academy. In addition, the Virginia CCE team partnered with the Metropolitan Business League, a non-profit organization that fosters business development and growth for women and BIPOC owned businesses, to increase employer outreach and capacity for hiring youth with disabilities.

Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

The Virginia CCE community collaborative in Richmond nurtured strong partnerships with key grant partners in the first half of their grant, developing momentum for their systems change efforts and specific grant activities. For example, the Virginia CCE team developed a strong partnership with staff and leadership in Richmond Public Schools. One transition program leader served as a champion for the project, and she actively promoted the project and collaborated with the grant team on activities in the initial startup of the grant. Although she recently left for another position, she will continue as a collaborative member

⁴ EPIC stands for the Real Pay for Real Jobs (RPRJ) Education and Outreach, Partnership Development, provisions of Individualized Services and Capacity Building (EPIC) Approach, a Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services grant.



and support initiatives in Richmond and across the state. Collaborative members discuss and collaborate on strategies for reducing duplication in transition services and increasing engagement with families and businesses. Although the collaborative in Colonial Heights is still forming, the Virginia CCE team leverages relationships with key individuals in the school district as the foundation for building a strong collaborative in that community as well.



LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Landscape analyses for the CCE grants aim to assess community resources, strengths, needs, and gaps related to providing consistent and seamless services for youth with ID/DD and their families that promote opportunities for CIE, post-secondary education, and independent living.

Landscape Analysis Approach

The Virginia CCE team is conducting landscape analysis activities within each of their two pilot communities. To summarize their findings, the team develops living documents that they post on their website and update as needed. The Colonial Heights team is just beginning their landscape analysis. The team completed two versions of the Richmond landscape analysis in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Major landscape analysis activities include photovoice, community conversations, a business survey, and virtual asset mapping.

▶ Photovoice

The Virginia CCE team conducted two photovoice projects in Richmond with high school students and young adults with ID/DD. Photovoice is a technique in which stakeholders, in this case high school students and young adults, collect data via pictures and capture the meaning behind their images. The photovoice projects helped the Virginia CCE team better understand transition and employment processes and practices in the community and offered a learning opportunity for students to explore employment and gain self-advocacy tools. They conducted the [first study](#) virtually with five students, while the second photovoice study included 15 students in an intensive support classroom. After students completed their photovoice work, the students showcased their photos and quotes from employment experiences in a public gallery. Community members and students provided positive feedback about photovoice, noting the benefits for student capacity building. Richmond Public Schools is also interested in conducting similar projects across the division after seeing how successful the experience was for students.



▶ **Community Conversations**

Community conversations engage a variety of stakeholders to discuss community resources, strengths, and gaps. The Virginia CCE team held two virtual [community conversations](#) in Richmond during the first year of the project. In Colonial Heights, the Virginia CCE team planned to hold their first community conversation in person in February 2024.

▶ **Business Survey**

The Virginia CCE team partnered with the Metropolitan Business League to disseminate a “business insights survey” to gather insights from Richmond-area employers. Fifteen businesses responded and shared about their barriers and interests in learning about hiring and supporting individuals with ID/DD.

▶ **Virtual Asset Mapping**

The Virginia CCE team added virtual asset mapping to their landscape analysis activities, with the goal of providing easier access to information about local employment services. The team developed a virtual asset map on Google Maps that includes a list of community-based resources in the city of Richmond. As an interactive resource, the virtual asset map allows youth with ID/DD and their families to identify and locate services. Example services on the map include K-12 education, post-secondary education, and disability advocacy organizations. The Virginia CCE team will update the map regularly, as well as analyze results to understand the accessibility of resources, especially for marginalized communities.

Landscape Analysis Findings

The Virginia CCE team published their landscape analysis findings on the [Project PEACE website](#). The landscape analysis revealed significant gaps in available resources, including services, staff, and funding. Even when services are available, a lack of a centralized location and general lack of awareness may prevent youth and families from accessing services that are available to them. Pervasive low expectations of youth with ID/DD and their employment opportunities also negatively impact transition outcomes, and there are opportunities to improve expectations through educating youth, families, employers, educators, and providers to shed light on the opportunities and possibilities youth with ID/DD have for CIE. There are also opportunities to better educate employers, many of whom expressed interest in hiring youth with ID/DD but need additional knowledge and training to increase their capacity to do so. Community conversation participants also highlighted partnerships, collaboration, and self-advocacy as community strengths to leverage in addressing knowledge and expectation gaps. The photovoice project offered opportunities for students to identify their personal strengths and goals related to employment and specific barriers to employment, such as a lack of transportation.



Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

The Virginia CCE grant's landscape analysis activities intentionally engage a variety of stakeholders through diverse methods. In Richmond, the team engaged parents, youth with ID/DD, employers, and community members to provide insights about community strengths, resources, and gaps. These findings inform other grant activities, pointing the team to specific gaps to address. For example, the team added the virtual asset mapping activity after identifying a lack of accessibility to information about key community services through their other landscape analysis activities. The team will leverage lessons learned in Richmond from conducting their landscape analysis activities to inform their approach in Colonial Heights. Taken together, the landscape analysis activities in both communities ensure the team grounds grant activities and planning in community knowledge.



Transition Plan Development and Implementation

Informed by landscape analysis findings, CCE grant recipients must develop and implement transition plans to address the needs of youth with ID/DD and their families. Each grant recipient develops and implements a unique transition plan approach, tailored to their community or communities' needs, to achieve their intended outcomes.

Transition Plan Development Approach

With the help of community collaborative partners, the Virginia CCE team created an overarching transition plan that lays out the processes for supporting Richmond and Colonial Heights to improve transition outcomes for youth with ID/DD. Leveraging information from the landscape analysis, the Virginia CCE team completed the Richmond transition plan and is implementing activities. In Colonial Heights, the Virginia CCE team is still completing landscape analysis activities and developing their transition plan. The team will continually update the transition plans as needed.

Transition Plan Characteristics and Activities

The Virginia CCE team is implementing transition plan activities in Richmond in the following four areas:

▶ Opportunities for Students

The Virginia CCE team is expanding opportunities for youth with ID/DD, with a special focus on promoting work-based learning opportunities in local high schools. Photovoice enhances these activities, as



students take pictures to document work-based learning experiences and communicate their employment preferences and support needs. The Virginia CCE team is also implementing virtual employment portfolios, through which students will share self-descriptions, employment-based education experiences, and previous employment experiences on a personal website. Employment portfolios can be shared with employers when students apply for jobs. Additionally, the Virginia CCE team is implementing student-led enterprises with elementary and middle school students to prepare youth for work-based learning. As part of this initiative, youth will enhance their work skills by working with teachers to design and implement a business in their school.

▶ **Teacher Training and Technical Assistance**

Training and technical assistance for teachers aims to improve their capacity to promote work-based learning for students. The Virginia CCE team brought together Richmond Public School teachers to learn strategies and best practices for work-based learning through a five-module training series and learning community. The modules used a train-the-trainer model, and participating teachers now serve as mentor teachers within their schools to expand the reach. In summer 2023, the Virginia CCE team held a three-day Transition Academy for intensive supports teachers. This academy provided attendees with basic strategies for transition assessment, student-centeredness, and employment preparation. Significantly, the Transition Academy fostered community and family collaboration. For example, the academy connected teachers with representatives from vocational rehabilitation, their local Community Services Board, and their local Postsecondary Education Program, [VCU ACE-IT in College](#). A parent panel grounded the academy's work in the lived experiences of families and their children with disabilities.

▶ **Employer Capacity Building**

To build capacity among community businesses, the Virginia CCE team and their grant partners developed a resource document, a series of three "coffee and conversation" events for local employers, and a disability training pilot with five local businesses. The team plans to expand their offering of employer capacity-building events through a panel offering peer-to-peer learning and other activities.

▶ **Supports for Families**

The Virginia CCE team and their grant partners are expanding educational resources for families. Two family members developed videos to share their transition experiences and recommendations, offering a peer learning opportunity to hear from families with similar experiences. Key grant partners SOAR365 and the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services also provided opportunities for parents to participate in sessions on benefits counseling, eligibility for employment services, and the impact of employment on future services.



Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

Bringing together community collaborative partners to promote work-based learning opportunities for students was instrumental for the Virginia CCE grant's initial successes. In collaboration with Richmond Public Schools, the teacher trainings and Transition Academy helped improve knowledge on best practices for promoting community employment opportunities for students and for helping youth document and work toward their personalized employment interests. Teachers provided positive feedback on these initiatives, noting that the strategies shared help them promote an employment mindset in their classes.

Collaborative partners also helped identify specific barriers to address, such as the need to account for the cost of job coaches and to prepare parents and students to begin application processes for pre-employment transition services and vocational rehabilitation services early. One primary goal of work-based learning opportunities is to offer employment options that match students' interests; in pursuit of this goal, the team faces challenges with transportation access, as not all businesses that would otherwise be options are easily accessible by bus.



EVALUATION

Each grant recipient will use process and summative evaluation techniques to analyze the delivery of project activities and determine the project's success in meeting intended outcomes.

Methodology and Approach

The Virginia CCE team evaluates the outcomes of their grant by collecting feedback on grant activities. For example, the team gathered feedback via surveys on their train-the-trainer modules, photovoice project and gallery, their Transition Academy, and the coffee and conversation series. In addition to collecting general satisfaction data, the Virginia CCE team uses this feedback to generate ideas for improvement and collect ideas from survey participants about additional topics of discussion.

Intended Outcomes

The Virginia CCE team tracks progress toward their intended outcomes in multiple ways, including but not limited to surveys, focus groups, and monitoring changes in school district data (e.g., applications for inclusive post-secondary education programs). They have begun collecting data for all intended outcomes and will have data by the end of the grant.



LOOKING AHEAD

- The Virginia CCE team will conduct landscape analysis activities in the Colonial Heights community, starting with community conversations.
- The Virginia CCE team will help youth with ID/DD develop virtual employment portfolios to enhance their resumes and prepare for interviews.
- The Virginia CCE team will partner with SOAR365 to hold an employer roundtable in Richmond to connect community businesses for peer learning and offer consultation and training about participating in work-based learning with youth with ID/DD.