

Career-Connected Learning for Students with Disabilities

Two major trends in education today are increasingly influencing school priorities and programs. First, schools need to be relevant and increase their focus on preparing students for college and careers. Second, schools cannot do this in a vacuum, but need multi-sector public and private partnerships, resources, and support. Heeding these changes, educators need to make certain design priorities accommodate students with disabilities so they are included.

What educators and policy makers are beginning to fully understand is that *all* students, including those with disabilities, are on career pathways, and that *all* pathways lead to careers. For the state of New Mexico, and as a framework for educational change in districts and states across the country, CCL offers opportunities for major policy impact and systemic change.

The State of New Mexico is submitting a proposal for a five-year grant to the U.S. Department of Education's Disability Innovation Fund to develop a broad program of services leading to competitive integrated employment for students with disabilities. The foundation for this program will be the inclusion of students with disabilities in career-focused learning from middle school through to graduation.

The solutions presented in this proposal constitute a partnership framework within which students with disabilities explore careers, learn practicable math skills, and gain self-confidence as they successfully transition from high school to either vocational service supports or postsecondary programs with needed accommodations. The following components of the project will be adapted for students with disabilities: (1) A *Career Exploration* component will take students on a journey from awareness to exploration, aligning with their own interests and values, in order to guide students with disabilities through a connected and cohesive career program. (2) The *Pathway2Careers math curriculum*, which was designed to be responsive to students of differing abilities and learning styles, will let students with disabilities participate at their own interest and skill level. Adaptations will include audio and braille accommodations.

Educational materials for the curriculum recognize the 13 IDEA eligibility categories including autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment. Appropriate resources will be provided to all participating schools and community partners.

The proposed components and design enhancements are critical for students with special needs, who often require direct instruction and do not automatically make connections between what they learn and how it is used. During the initial planning phase of this project, the NMPED will bring together educators and school leaders, stakeholders from Special Education, employers, workforce development organizations, and others to strengthen collaborations and establish partnerships to provide a career focus for these students.