

# Collaboration between Special Education (SPED) and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

A Report by the SC Disability Employment Coalition's Transition to Careers Committee, in collaboration with Hire Me SC

May 2019



*The SC Disability Employment Coalition is a partnership of more than 40 stakeholders dedicated to addressing employment barriers for people with disabilities. Hire Me SC is a campaign developed by the Coalition to promote a culture of inclusion across the state of South Carolina, one in which employment for every individual, disability or not, is the norm rather than the exception. Hire Me SC is coordinated by Able South Carolina and supported through funding from the Administration for Community Living at the US Department of Health and Human Services. Learn more at <http://www.hiremesc.org>.*

# Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

## Introduction

Following the reauthorization of the Perkins Act in 2018<sup>1</sup> and its new requirements for how states and school districts engage and track the participation of students with disabilities in secondary Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, members of the Transition to Careers Committee moved into action to learn more about the current landscape of collaboration between CTE and special education (SPED) professionals. As in many other domains, there is a tremendous disparity between postsecondary employment outcomes for youth with and without disabilities (Fogg, Harrington, & McMahon, 2010)<sup>2</sup>, and access to CTE programs has been shown to be predictive of post-school employment for youth with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009)<sup>3</sup>.

The Transition to Careers Committee (T2CC) is a subgroup of the SC Disability Employment Coalition, working in conjunction with the Hire Me SC campaign to build capacity in the state towards improved employment outcomes for South Carolinians with disabilities. The following report provides an analysis of the findings gleaned from a 9-question survey disseminated electronically via SurveyMonkey by the T2CC to professionals supporting youth with disabilities in South Carolina in March and April of 2019.

## Survey Respondents

All survey respondents were asked to verify the state in which they work, yielding 337 unique responses from South Carolina-based professionals supporting youth with disabilities. All responses from outside of South Carolina and from respondents without a clear affiliation to young adults with disabilities were deleted. 2.4% of respondents were Middle School SPED Teachers (n=8), 27.3% High School SPED Teachers (n=92), 31.2% High School CTE Teachers (n=105), 4.8% Middle School CTE Teachers (n=16), 5.1% School Administrators (n=17), 4.5% School District CTE Administrators (n=15), 10.1% School District SPED Administrators (n=34), 4.8% School District Staff (n=16), 0.59% State Department of Education Staff (n=2), 0.3% Local School Board Member (n=1), 0.9% SC Vocational Rehabilitation Staff (n=3), 0.3% Technical College Faculty or Staff (n=1), 1.8% School Psychologists (n=6), 1.5% School Counselors (n=5), 1.8% Transition Specialists/Transition Coordinators (n=6) and 2.9% Other Professionals Supporting Young Adults with Disabilities (n=10). To offer a clearer lens by which to understand the data acquired in select, subsequent survey items, these roles were grouped into four categories: All Respondents, CTE Professionals (Middle School CTE Teachers, High School CTE Teachers, and District CTE Administrators), SPED Professionals (Middle School SPED Teachers, High School SPED Teachers, District SPED Administrators, and Transition Specialists/Transition Coordinators), and Misc. Education and Disability Services Professionals (e.g., SPED Teachers with Roles in Middle and High School, School-Level Administrators, and School Psychologists).

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on Perkins V, visit <https://cte.ed.gov/legislation/perkins-v>

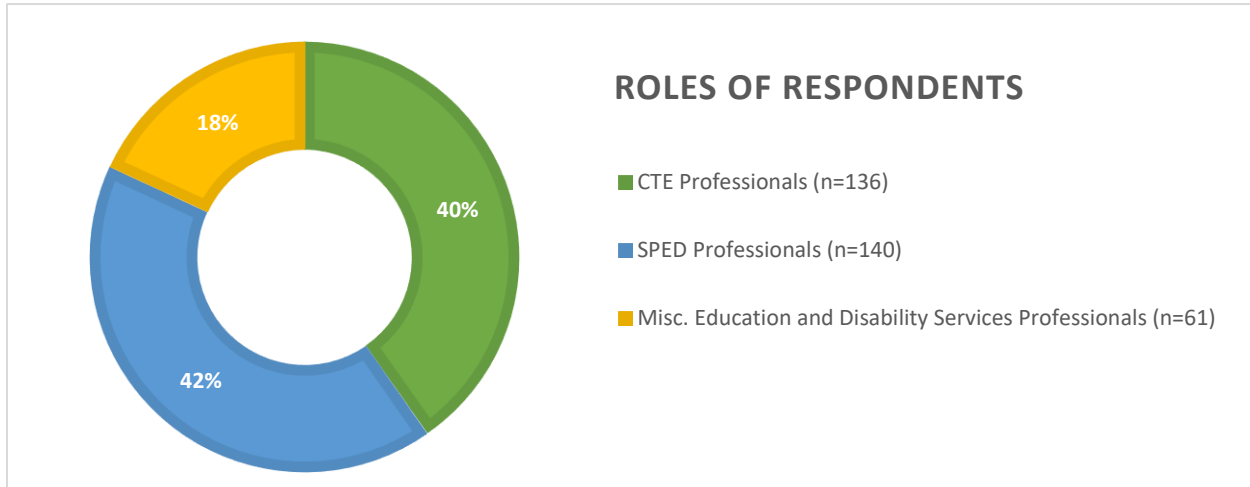
<sup>2</sup> Fogg, N. P., Harrington, P. E., McMahon, B. T. (2010). The impact of the Great Recession upon the unemployment of Americans with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 33, 193-202.

<sup>3</sup> Mazzotti, V. L., Rowe, D. A., Sinclair, J., Poppen, M., Woods, W.E., & Shearer, M. (2015). Predictors of postschool success: A systematic review of NLT2 secondary analyses. *Journal of Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 39, 196-215. doi: 10.1177/2165143415588047

Test, D. W., Mazzotti, V. L., Mustian, A. L., Fowler, C. H., Kortering, L. J., & Kohler, P. H. (2009). Evidence based secondary transition predictors for improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 32, 160-181.

## Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Figure 1: Roles of Respondents Grouped by Category



### Survey Structure and Dissemination

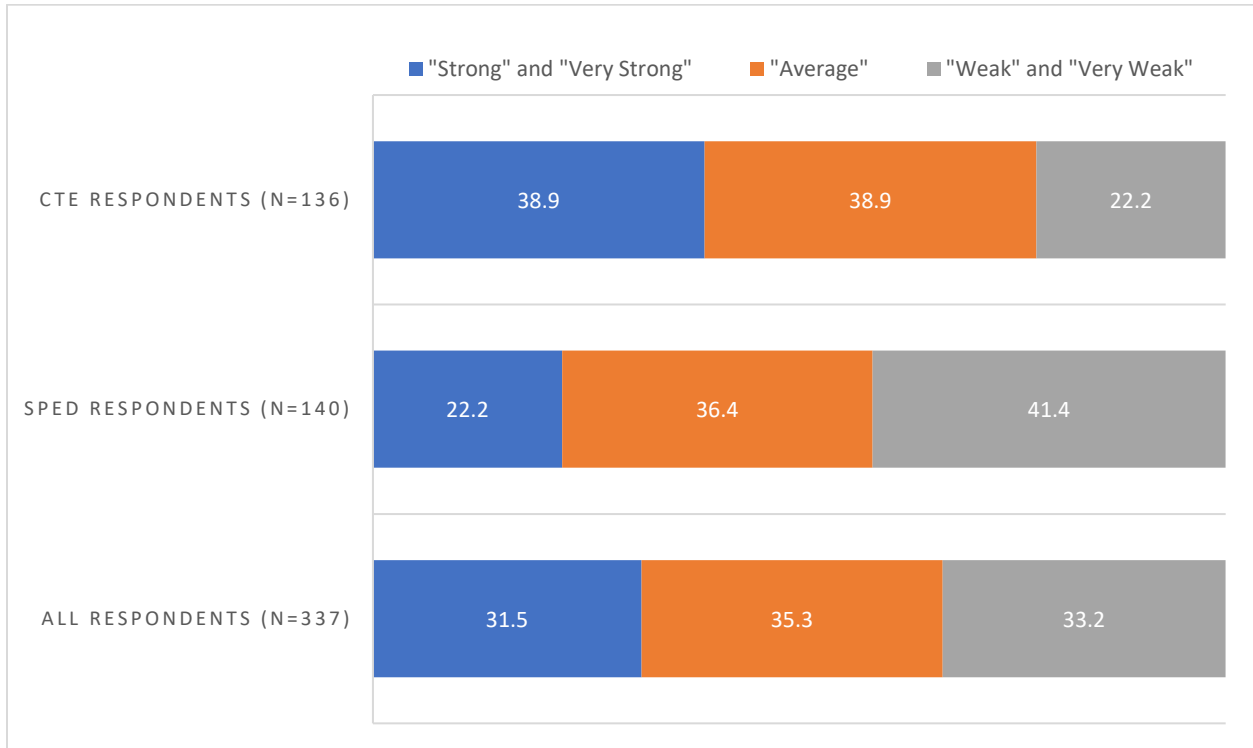
Following the first two demographic items, respondents were asked a series of six, closed-response questions about the nature of collaboration between CTE and SPED programs and the involvement of youth with disabilities in CTE. The survey ended with a single, open-ended item about what respondents would like to see changed in CTE and SPED collaboration toward better serving youth with disabilities. With the exception of this last item, all survey items were included in SurveyMonkey as forced response, requiring an answer for the survey to be submitted. Responses were gathered by partners sharing the link with colleagues, via social media, and by group emails. A special thanks to the SC Department of Education's Office of Special Education Services for their outreach support, which was directly connected to 87.5% (n=295) of all survey responses.

### Findings

To begin, respondents were asked "How would you rate the level of collaboration between CATE and SPED programs to serve students with disabilities?" and were provided with a 5-point Likert scale: "Very Strong," "Strong," "Average," "Weak," and "Very Weak." To ease interpretation of the data acquired from this item, these five points were grouped into three categories: "Very Strong" and "Strong," "Average," and "Very Weak" and "Weak." When taken in aggregate, responses from those surveyed were roughly equally distributed across these three categories. When disaggregated by SPED and CTE-affiliated respondents, however, a slightly different picture of perceptions on collaboration emerges. When responses from these two groups were compared, CTE-affiliated respondents were nearly twice as likely to rate collaboration in serving students with disabilities as "Very Strong" or "Strong." SPED-affiliated respondents were nearly twice as likely to rate collaboration as "Very Weak" or "Weak."

## Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Figure 2: Rate the Level of Collaboration Between CTE and SPED Programs to Serve Students with Disabilities



On the following item, survey participants were asked “What, if any, barriers to collaboration between CATE and SPED have you experienced?” and instructed to “Check all that apply” from a list of 7 (seven) options. These options were derived by the collective experience of T2CC members around the state. They included: “Training on inclusion for CATE teachers,” “Training on inclusion for SPED teachers,” “Funding for co-teaching in CATE classes,” “Interest of CATE leadership to include students with disabilities,” “Students with disabilities not meeting CATE requirements for grades, attendance, and/or behavior,” “Overall funding for CATE is very limited,” and “Interest from SPED leadership to include students with disabilities.” 56.9% (n=192) of respondents selected “Students with disabilities not meeting CTE requirements for grades, attendance, and/or behavior” as the most commonly encountered barrier to collaboration. 52.2% (n=176) selected “Training on inclusion for CTE teachers,” and 38.6% (n=130) selected “Funding for co-teaching CTE classes.” Respondents were also provided with an 8<sup>th</sup>, open-ended response option of “Other.” 44 responses were written in for this option, and the themes of responses were largely consistent with those provided to the last question of the survey: lacking options for training, funding concerns, CTE requirements and expectations around students with disabilities inability to meet requirements as “CTE completers”, lacking requisite interest or knowledge among parties for collaboration, and lacking support from SPED teachers/staff to CTE teachers.

## Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Figure 3: Salient Open-Ended Responses on Barriers to CTE and SPED Collaboration

“We very much want our students with disabilities to be included. However, we are told that the classes are too full or will hurt the program (non-completers).”

“In the four years of teaching as a CATE instructor I have only sat down with one SPED specialist to discuss the students issues once.”

“Our CATE is great with students with learning disabilities, but there does not seem to be availability for students working towards a certificate...”

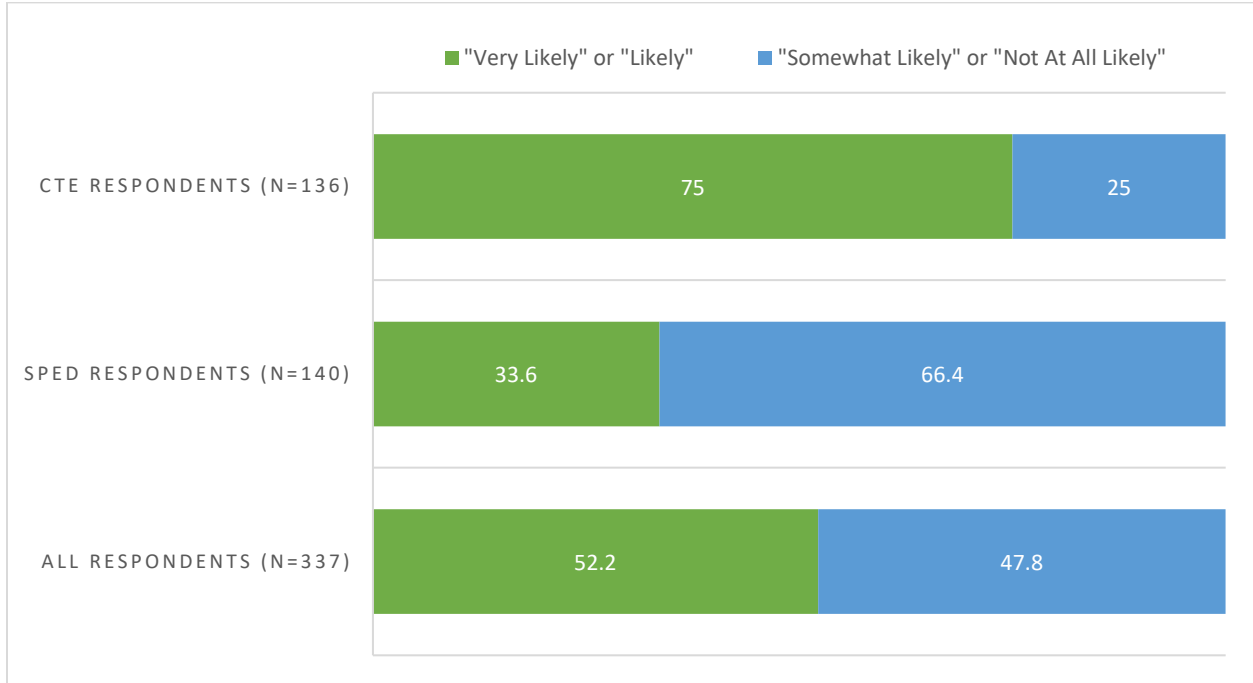
“CATE teachers and administrators understanding that SPED students should be included.”

“Guidance - scheduling of students with disabilities is not seen as a priority. CATE courses are filled without regard to IEP Post-Secondary Goals.”

Of importance to T2CC members was also identifying whether respondents were aware of and/or engaged in data-based decision making around the participation of students with disabilities in CTE programs. Survey participants were asked a simple “yes” or “no” question: “Do you know of any current mechanisms in place for objectively assessing the level of participation of students with disabilities in CATE programs?”. 89.6% of respondents (n=302) indicated that they knew of no such mechanism. Similarly, important to committee members was how well students with disabilities, across disability categories, are currently represented in the make-up of students participating in CTE programs. Respondents were asked “How likely is it that students with IEPs will be proportionally represented in CATE programs in your high school/district?” and given a 4-point Likert scale to rate that likelihood. Response options included “Very Likely,” “Likely,” “Somewhat Likely,” and “Not At All Likely.” As in a previous item, response options were grouped together and depicted in aggregate, disaggregated by CTE-affiliated professionals, and disaggregated by SPED-affiliated professionals.

Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Figure 4: Likelihood of Students with IEPs Being Served in Representative Proportions in CTE Programs



Across all respondents, responses were roughly split in half between these two categories. Responses isolated by affiliation with CTE or SPED, however, show a great deal of variation. When compared to SPED-affiliated respondents, CTE-affiliated survey participants were nearly twice as likely to indicate that it was “Very Likely” or “Likely” that students with IEPs were equitably represented in CTE programs.

As a follow-up to this question, respondents were then asked, “Which group(s) of students with disabilities are most likely to participate in CATE programs,” presented with a list of 7 options, and asked to “Check all that apply.” The 7 options provided were: “All students with disabilities are equally likely to participate,” “Diploma track students with high incidence disabilities (e.g., ADHD, Learning Disabilities, etc.),” “Non-diploma track students with high incidence disabilities,” “Diploma track students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities),” “Non-diploma track students with low incidence disabilities,” “Diploma track students with emotional and behavioral disabilities,” and “Non-diploma track students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.” Respondents were also given an open-ended response option listed as “Other,” but only 2.3% (n=8) elected to use this option. 63.2% (n=213) indicated that “Students with high incidence disabilities (e.g., ADHD) on a Diploma Track” was the most likely group of students with disabilities to participate in CTE programs. The two groups selected by the fewest respondents were “Non-diploma track students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities)” (17.2%, n=58) and “Non-diploma track students with emotional and behavioral disabilities” (13.9%, n=47).

To close the survey, respondents were asked “Should SPED and CATE programs work together to serve students with IEPs (diploma track and non-diploma track students, students with high and low-incidence disabilities)?” and given a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 as “No/Unsure” to 5 as “Absolutely!”. 73.3% (n=247) selected “Absolutely!”.

## Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

61.4% (n=207) elected to answer the final question, an optional, open-ended response item: “What, if anything, would you change about the way in which SPED and CATE programs collaborate to serve students with disabilities?”. Responses varied greatly, including 12.1% (n=25) who indicated they felt that things were going well or had no improvements to suggest. Of the remaining suggestions for improved collaboration, some clear themes presented themselves: improved communication, planning, and training; addressing funding pressures for co-teaching and support staff; revisions to CTE requirements and the rigidity of what constitutes “CTE completers”; and increasing buy-in from both parties at the state and local level.

Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Figure 5: Salient Open-Ended Responses on Suggestions for Improved CTE and SPED Collaboration

“We need a shift in district narrative. Our district has consistently focused on the future college student. Even with the shift to college and career ready, the focus is not on those entering the workforce right out of high school. Our district has never had a true vocational center. The drive is for upper level CATE, such as [subject areas removed to protect identity of respondent], etc. District Level CATE administrators and SPED need to have time to sit together and develop common goals.”

“SPED and CATE should work very closely together to ensure the success for students with disabilities. CATE should not just be for high achieving students or students who are not behavioral or academic ‘problems’. Oftentimes, these classes provide a pathway for postsecondary success for students that would typically fall through the cracks.”

“I would want to train the CATE teachers on how to better serve the SPED students in order to “level the playing field.” I feel like many teachers just lower their expectations for SPED students, rather than accommodate them to enable them to rise to the same standards as the typical students.”

“Students are often placed in CATE classes without consideration of the students’ strengths, weaknesses, or interests. For example, students are placed in Advanced Art when they have no interest in drawing or painting, but there may have been an engineering or STEM class that the student was interested in. I feel like this can set the child up for failure because they are not interested in being in the art class and therefore will not put as much effort into the class and may end up receiving discipline referrals because they are misbehaving or refusing to work because of that lack of interest. Because of this, I feel as though Guidance should also be a part of this question.”

More training for SPED teachers on these programs so that we are fully aware of what goes on in those programs before recommending a student go there.

Provide more support through SPED to adapt curriculum for appropriate access for non-diploma students with low-incidence disabilities. Also more flexible accountability for students who will not complete a traditional class cluster, but are employed in the field after completion.

#### Discussion

The desire of T2CC members to increase collaboration between CTE and SPED programs is likely evident in the make-up of this survey. Anecdotally in South Carolina, it is well understood that students with disabilities often miss opportunities for inclusion in general education, including CTE programs at the middle and high school level. Further, as described in the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition’s *Quick Guide: Career and Technical Education & Secondary Youth with Disabilities*, the concentration of youth with disabilities in CTE programs has been linked to fewer unexcused absences and better odds of on-time graduation (Theobald, Goldhaber, Gratz, and Holden, 2017)<sup>4</sup>. Thusly, Committee members approached this issue with the intent to more fully understand the current

---

<sup>4</sup> Theobald, R., Goldhaber, D., Gratz, T., and Holden, K. L. (2017). Career and Technical Education, Inclusion, and Postsecondary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities. CEDR Working Paper 2017. University of Washington, Seattle, WA.



## Collaboration Between SPED and CTE Programs in South Carolina: The Current Reality and Recommendations for Moving Forward

landscape of the participation of students with disabilities in CTE programs, barriers to that participation, and the attitudes and perspectives on these topics of the professionals supporting them. In this way, this survey and its accompanying analysis are far from scientific. A similar undertaking from a more neutral position might have yielded somewhat different findings.

From what has been gathered, however, it is clear that there is work to be done toward better supporting youth with disabilities on the pathway to career readiness in South Carolina. To improve upon centuries of disparity in employment outcomes for South Carolinians with disabilities, as is the position of Employment First, equitable access for all publicly-funded career preparation options must be our collective aim.

To this end, the SC Disability Employment Coalition and Hire Me SC suggest the following courses of action:

1. Metrics should be employed at the high school and school district level to objectively assess the level of participation of students with disabilities in CTE programs. Information collected should be detailed enough to answer questions about known barriers to CTE program participation within this subset of the population based on variables like diploma track and type of disability.
2. Fully incorporate students with disabilities in a representative fashion into all school district affiliated career preparation activities regardless of type of disability, diploma track, or perceived deficits. For example, if 8% of students in a school district are not on a diploma track, we should expect to see 8% of students or more participating in CTE programs that are not on a diploma track.
3. Using requisites for CTE programs like grades, attendance, and behavior or diploma track may categorically exclude many groups of students with disabilities. As they prepare for implementing the new requirements of the Perkins Act, SC school districts should consider means for assessing formal and informal policies governing student participation in CTE programs.
4. Each day, secondary special educators are providing instruction to students on career exploration, career awareness, and vocational training. While the most readily available place for providing this instruction may be the special education classroom, school and district-level administrators should consider opportunities for co-teaching, leveraging CTE offerings with the expertise of special education teachers wherever possible.

As a body, we ask that SC educators join us in discussions and actions that affirm the position that every possible opportunity should be afforded to all SC youth, and we ask for the address of all systemic barriers that may limit those opportunities.

To join in the efforts of the SC Disability Employment Coalition or discuss collaboration for fostering more inclusive career preparation opportunities in your local area, drop us a line today to get the conversation started at [hiremesc@able-sc.org](mailto:hiremesc@able-sc.org).