







Investing in Potential.

An Analysis of the Educational, Employment, and Economic Impact of High School High Tech

THE ABLE TRUST™

Index of Acronyms

- **ACTE** – Association for Career and Technical Education
- **ADA** – Americans with Disabilities Act
- **ACS** – American Community Survey
- **BEBR** – Bureau of Economic and Business Research (University of Florida)
- **BLS** – U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- **BVR** – Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (historic/federal usage, if cited)
- **CTE** – Career and Technical Education
- **DEC** – Demographic Estimating Conference (State of Florida)
- **DOE** – (Florida) Department of Education
- **FAPE** – Free Appropriate Public Education
- **FCAN** – Florida College Access Network
- **FCS** – Florida College System
- **FDOE/VR** – Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- **GED** – General Educational Development (high school equivalency credential)
- **HSHT** – High School High Tech
- **IEP** – Individualized Education Program
- **IES** – Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education)
- **IPS** – Individual Placement and Support
- **LMI** – Labor Market Information
- **NBER** – National Bureau of Economic Research
- **NCWD/Youth** – National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth
- **NTACT:C** – National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative
- **ODEP** – Office of Disability Employment Policy (U.S. Department of Labor)
- **PSM** – Propensity Score Matching
- **REACH** – Reimagining Education and Career Help Act
- **ROI** – Return on Investment
- **SAIL** – Strengthening Alignment between Industry and Learning (SAIL to 60 initiative)
- **SLDS** – State Longitudinal Data System
- **SSDI** – Social Security Disability Insurance (include if referenced)
- **SSI** – Supplemental Security Income
- **TFR** – Total Fertility Rate
- **VR** – Vocational Rehabilitation

Executive Summary

The Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, Inc., also known as The Able Trust, was legislatively created in 1990 to serve as the direct support organization for the Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (FDOE/VR) to encourage public and private support to enhance vocational rehabilitation and the employment of Floridians with disabilities. That population is substantial. 2025 Census updates show an estimated 13.4 to 13.6 percent of Floridians have a disability over the five years from 2019 to 2023. This translates to 2,924,178 Floridians with disabilities, of whom about 1,286,547 are of prime working age (age 18 – 64), and about 631,540 age 16 and over who are working. The rate of disabled working Floridians ages 16 and older, at 23 percent, is slightly lower than that of the nation as a whole, at 26.6 percent, and well below the share of Floridians with no disability who work, at 57.4 percent.[1]

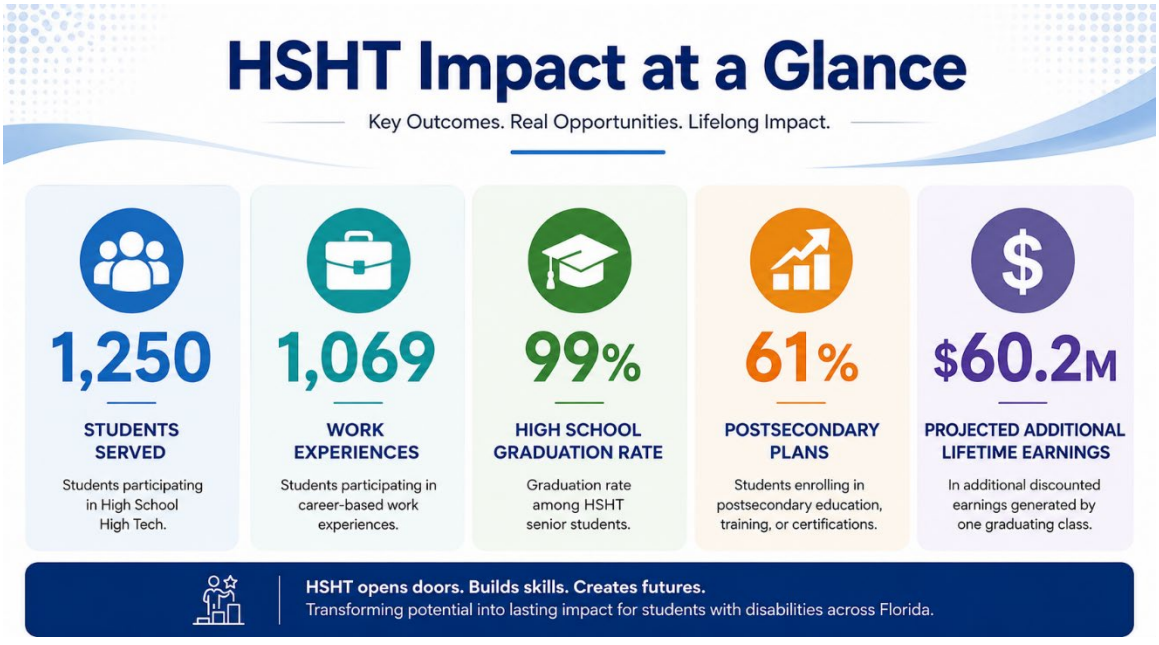
High School High Tech (HSHT) is The Able Trust's premier transition program that prepares high school students with disabilities for postsecondary education and employment through a structured mix of rigorous school-based preparation, work-based learning, youth leadership, community connections, and family engagement.[2] Independent assessments of the effectiveness of programs to benefit students with disabilities make it clear that well-structured interventions embodying these elements are among the most beneficial for participating individuals with disabilities, their families, and for taxpayers. The strongest predictors of better post-school outcomes, as identified in evidence-driven research, include paid work experiences in high school, participation in career and technical education, high family and educator expectations, and inclusive coursework.[3,4] These program attributes produce graduation and placement rates that substantially exceed those of comparable students with disabilities not participating in programs offering these features. Florida's HSHT programs are intentionally designed to provide all of these.

Florida's HSHT program administrator is The Able Trust. The HSHT program that started in Florida in 1994 at a single pilot site serving six students has grown over 30 years into a statewide network of programs operating in more than forty counties, in over one hundred high school or alternative settings, and serving thousands of students with disabilities every year.[5] Statistics show that 99 percent of 2024 – 2025 HSHT students graduated high school, with 61 percent of these planning to enroll in postsecondary education or pursue further training. Over the history of the program, 7,388 seniors have graduated from HSHT and the Able Trust has raised $3.33 million through its Major Gifts program, reducing the need for taxpayer-financed support.

This report quantifies the economic impact of the HSHT program as it operates at its current level of service. It then examines the economic consequences of expanding program service to reach a larger number of Florida's disabled population. As The Able Trust moves forward with its plan to increase annual participation to 5,000 students with disabilities, the economic impact will grow as well. Basic findings of the study are that increased participation will yield benefits substantially in excess of increased program costs to the State.

Key Findings

- At current enrollment levels, HSHT generates 1,250 student participants, 1,069 students participating in work experiences, a 99% high school graduation rate among seniors, and a 61% postsecondary enrollment rate.
- From 2012 to 2024, Florida's ages 5 – 17-year-old population with a disability grew by 46 percent, while the Florida population with a disability for all other age groups combined grew by 25.8 percent.
- Over the same time period, total U.S. population (including able and disabled) grew by 8.6 percent, so that the growth rate in Florida's ages 5 – 17 population with a disability, at 46.0 percent, was over five times as fast.
- Current graduation rates for HSHT students, at 99 percent, exceed those of non-participating students with disabilities and those of the general high school population.
- High-quality analysis from other states comparing matched pairs of students with disabilities finds that those who participated in career-focused programs such as HSHT had higher rates of employment, at 74 percent vs. 69 percent, and also had a higher rate of students who went on to college and further training, at 36 percent vs. 33 percent.
- The same analysis found a 20.6 percent wage premium accrued by the fourth year following graduation to those graduates with disabilities who participated in the HSHT-like program relative to similar students with disabilities who did not.
- This increment to expected earnings from HSHT is not enough to erase the wage differential between students with disabilities and those without disabilities but will clearly be large enough to generate a strongly positive ROI per dollar of program cost to the State.



- In Florida, the per-student lifetime earnings attributable to HSHT for the 662 graduates from the most recent school year implies that one HSHT graduating class would be expected to generate roughly $60.2 million in additional discounted earnings over the combined work lives of that year's graduating cohort.
- Application of standard multiplier models to these higher annual wages for Florida HSHT graduates suggests that this additional $60.2 million in wages paid will translate into a consumer spending impact that generates a total increment to wages of $96.3 million.
- Achievement by The Able Trust of the proposed growth to 5,000 students served per year would generate some $290 million in additional household income annually to Florida families, above and beyond the annual economic impacts seen from today's HSHT program. This is expected to generate as much as $19 million in additional general sales tax revenue for the state each year, well offsetting the incremental cost to the state of funding such an expansion.
- The ongoing implementation of Futures in Focus will help expand HSHT enrollment into lower grades, earlier awareness and contact will steer additional students with disabilities into the higher skill, higher wage, HSHT curriculum and program.

Measuring the Economic Impact of HSHT

The following sections examine the economic benefits of HSHT assuming current levels of service. We first provide estimates of the total population of people reporting disabilities, both nationally and in Florida. We then look at the number of Florida students served in a given year across the more than 100 sites reached by HSHT programs. Using current estimates of the annual wage benefits obtained by similar populations of learners, along with appropriate estimates of the duration of work lives of workers with disabilities, we provide credible estimates of the current money value of the benefits provided to HSHT-participating students. We then use similar methods to calculate the possible economic impact of increasing participation from current levels up to a rate of 5,000 students served per year.

What is High School High Tech?

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High School High Tech

The historical development of High School High Tech (HSHT) aligns with national efforts to improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities through school-to-work models. The program originated on the West Coast in the early 1980s as a partnership among business, education, and disability advocates to expose students with disabilities to science and technology careers, and later gained federal backing.[6]

HSHT is built on the Guideposts for Success framework, which uses empirical studies to define a set of essential domains for



successful transitions for youth with disabilities into the workforce. These essential domains are school-based preparatory experiences, career preparation and work-based learning, youth development and leadership, connecting activities, and family involvement and supports.[7] As ODEP and the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth elaborated the Guideposts for Success as a research-based transition framework, HSHT was formalized as a comprehensive program model that

operationalizes those guideposts in high school and community settings.[8]

Available evaluations and program reports for HSHT consistently document strong outcomes for participating students with disabilities, though formal peer-reviewed studies that rigorously assess the program's long-term economic contributions remain limited. The most comprehensive evaluation data comes from an analysis of states that were initial adopters (Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) during the 2005-06 school year. This multi-state study found that of 3,500 students participating in HSHT across 135 local sites, only 12 dropped out of school. This is an extraordinarily low dropout rate compared to the national 28-30% dropout rate for students with disabilities.[9]

The academic literature most relevant to assessing the likely beneficial labor market impact of HSHT centers on evidence-based predictors of post-school success for students with disabilities and the degree to which various interventions influence those predictors. Test, Mazzotti, and colleagues' 2009 paper, "Evidence-Based Secondary Transition Predictors for Improving Postschool Outcomes for Students with Disabilities," synthesized results across multiple high-quality correlational studies and identified sixteen in-school predictors, including paid employment during high school, career and technical education, high expectations, parental involvement, self-determination, and inclusion in general education, all of which were statistically associated with better postsecondary education, employment, and independent-living outcomes.[10]

Recent work has aimed to strengthen the causal interpretation of these relationships by employing more rigorous designs, including a priori analyses with multivariate controls. Mazzotti and co-authors' 2021 update, "Secondary Transition Predictors of Postschool Success," revisits and extends the 2009 predictor list, distinguishing between predictors with robust evidence from high-quality a priori studies and those supported by more limited or exploratory work.[11] The update confirms and, in some cases, upgrades the evidence base for several predictors central to HSHT—paid work, career and technical education, program of study, inclusion, self-determination, and parent expectations—while noting that other areas such as career awareness, community experiences, and interagency collaboration remain promising but less firmly established due to a shortage of newer, high-quality studies.[12] The same review introduces emerging predictors such as psychological empowerment, self-realization, and technology skills, which align with HSHT's emphasis on soft skills, digital literacy, and youth leadership.[13]

The synthesis described in these and other analyses have been the foundation for HSHT, and subsequent studies reaffirm that a relatively small set of in-school experiences has outsized influence on later outcomes for youth with disabilities.[14] Florida's HSHT

design aligns tightly with these predictors by embedding paid work experiences, career and technical courses, formal transition planning, and family engagement in a cohesive program. In practice, strong participation and outcomes numbers for HSHT participants are the norm in Florida today.

How Large is the Need for Services for Students with Disabilities?

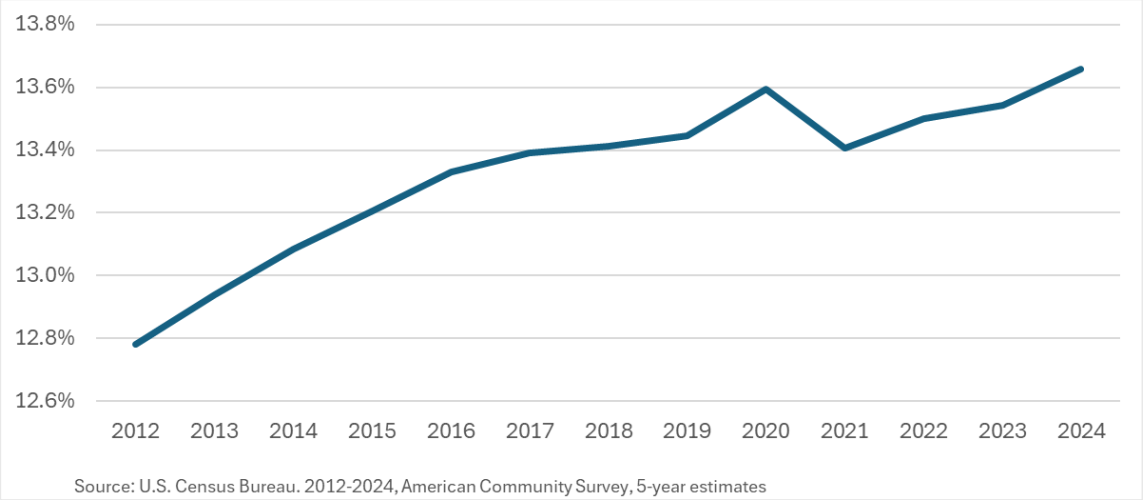
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that 12.4 percent, or 30.7 million, of the working-age population report a work-limiting health condition or difficulty.[15] The latest American Community Survey (ACS) data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 13.3 percent of the total civilian noninstitutional population, or 43.9 million Americans, report having a disability.[16]

The most recent ACS figures for Florida are similar to the national ones but slightly higher, showing 13.7 percent of the population reporting a disability. This implies that the size of the population reporting a disability in Florida in 2025 is approximately 3.02 million people.[17] Disability prevalence has risen faster than overall population growth, meaning people with disabilities now make up a larger fraction of the population than a decade ago.

While disability may once have been thought of as the domain of older Americans, the prevalence of "special health care needs" and developmental disabilities has increased, particularly in adolescence. The most recent ACS data for people ages 5 – 17 shows that although the share of the age cohort classified as disabled remains smaller among youth than among older age groups, it has grown from 5.1 percent to 6.7 percent over the 2012 to 2024 period. This growth rate is faster than overall disability growth rate in the population overall.

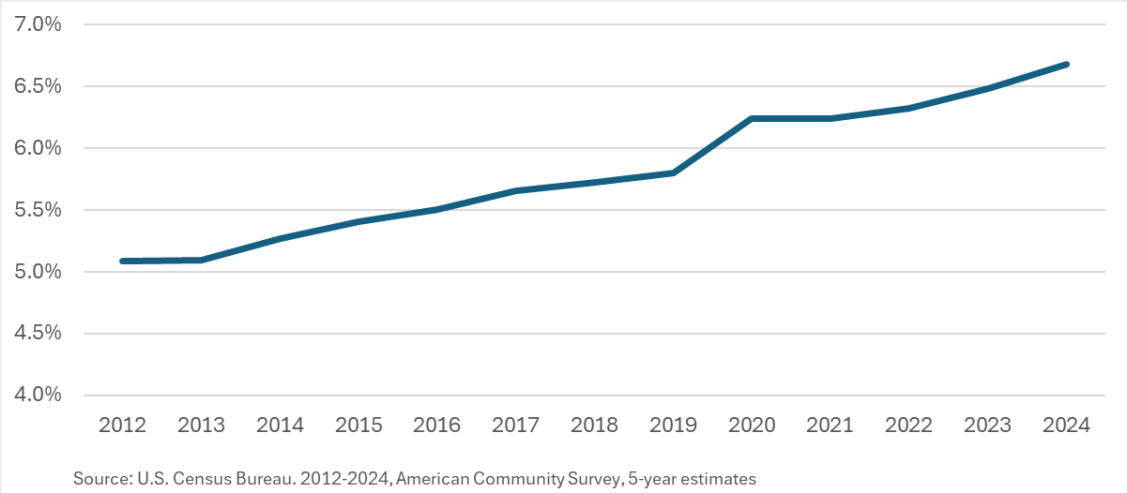
HHS and recent NHIS based studies report that, over recent decades, disability among youth has shifted from predominantly physical

Figure 1. Florida Population with Disabilities as Share of Total Florida Population



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2012-2024, American Community Survey, 5-year estimates

Figure 2. Floridians with Disabilities Ages 5 – 17 as Share of All Floridians Ages 5 – 17



conditions toward developmental and behavioral conditions, including learning disabilities, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and mental health related limitations. The data show continued growth in the number of students with disabilities who would benefit from appropriate training opportunities provided by HSHT.

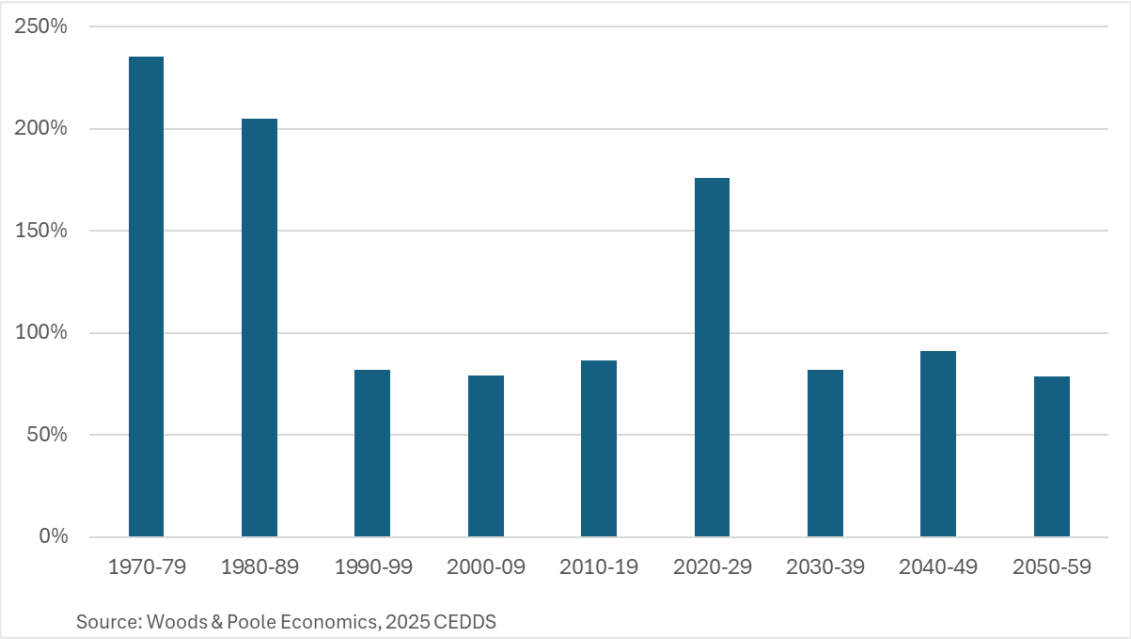
As shown in Figure 3, the growth rate in Florida population is often double that of the nation as a whole. Even in the decade of the 2007 – 2009 global financial crisis, which led to particularly intense real estate challenges for the state, Florida's population still grew 79 percent faster than the nation.

In the current decade, the inbound migration associated with the COVID pandemic and increased work-from-home rates means that Florida's growth rate of 2.73 percent has dwarfed the national rate of 1.0 percent. This implies that the number of people with need for services helping the disabled participate in the workforce is growing more rapidly than that of the nation as well.

Population growth in our state has averaged over 2.6 million per decade since 1970 and is likely to peak in the 2020 – 2029 decade at just over three million. Florida has accounted for at least 9.8 percent of total U.S. population growth in all of those decades, with a high of 15.9 percent of total U.S. population growth projected to occur in Florida in the current 2020 – 2029 decade.[18]

This means that while one in 30 Americans lived in Florida in 1970, by 2025, one in 14.5 Americans lived in the Sunshine State. Families continue to vote with their feet and make their home in Florida.

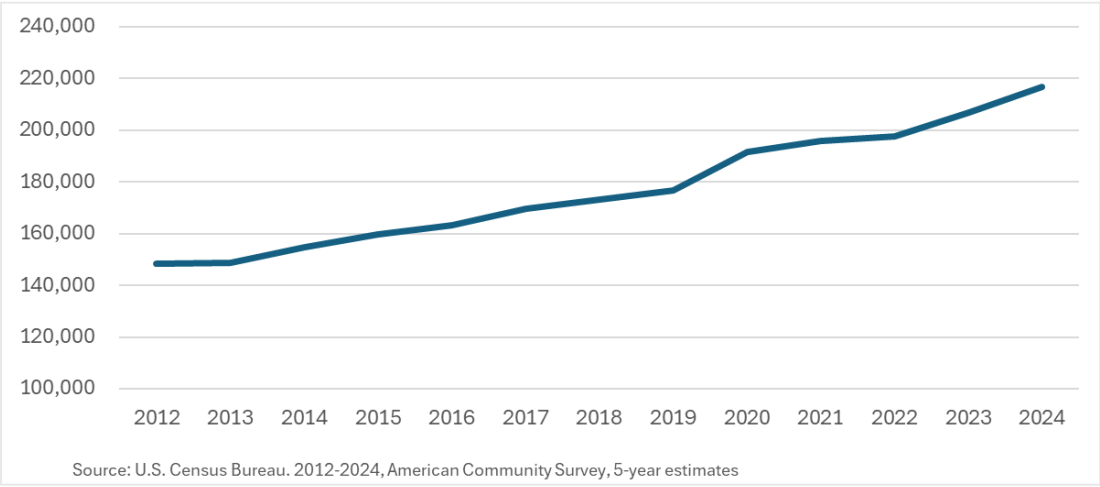
Figure 3. How Much Faster is Florida's Population Growth than that of the U.S.?



Florida faces a large and growing need for appropriate training to help give people with disabilities the life and career opportunities they need and deserve. Census figures suggest that the population of people with disabilities has risen at an even faster rate.

From 2012 to 2024, ACS estimates show that the 5 – 17 year old population with a disability grew by 68,250 people, or 46.0 percent, while the Florida population with a disability for all other age groups combined grew by 27.1 percent.

Figure 4. Florida Population Ages 5 - 17 with Disabilities



Students with disabilities face greater than normal challenges in achieving high school graduation and the skills that go with it. Recent data show that, nationally, over 84 percent of non-disabled students graduate from high school, while only 65.5 percent of students with disabilities do.[19]

HSHT Implementation in Florida

In FY 2024 – 2025, Able Trust celebrated the 30th anniversary of HSHT in Florida.[20] The program by that time had served 7,037 students with disabilities and grown services substantially, so that recent cohorts have numbered more than 1,200 students annually.[21] Programs operate across 43 counties and 128 schools or alternative settings, including Department of Juvenile Justice facilities, with an explicit expansion goal of 5,000 participating students per year by 2028.[22] HSHT operates year-round, targeting youth with disabilities ages 14 – 22 who are pursuing standard diplomas, special diplomas, certificates of completion, or GEDs.[23]

This statewide infrastructure has been built out through memoranda of agreement with school districts, educational foundations, Goodwill organizations, centers for independent living, and other nonprofits.[24] The program's administrative structure and monitoring have been reviewed by state auditing entities, all of which concluded that The Able Trust maintains sufficient internal controls to ensure high-quality HSHT service delivery. They have characterized the organization as highly committed and proactive in site visits and technical assistance.[25]

Recent HSHT program outcomes provide strong evidence of effectiveness. In the 2018 – 2019 school year, 596 HSHT participants graduated from high school, yielding a graduation rate greater than 99 percent compared with 80 percent for other Florida students with disabilities, and 83 percent of HSHT graduates entered postsecondary education or employment, significantly outpacing statewide transitions among students with disabilities.[26] Among that cohort, 39 percent matriculated to state colleges, 12

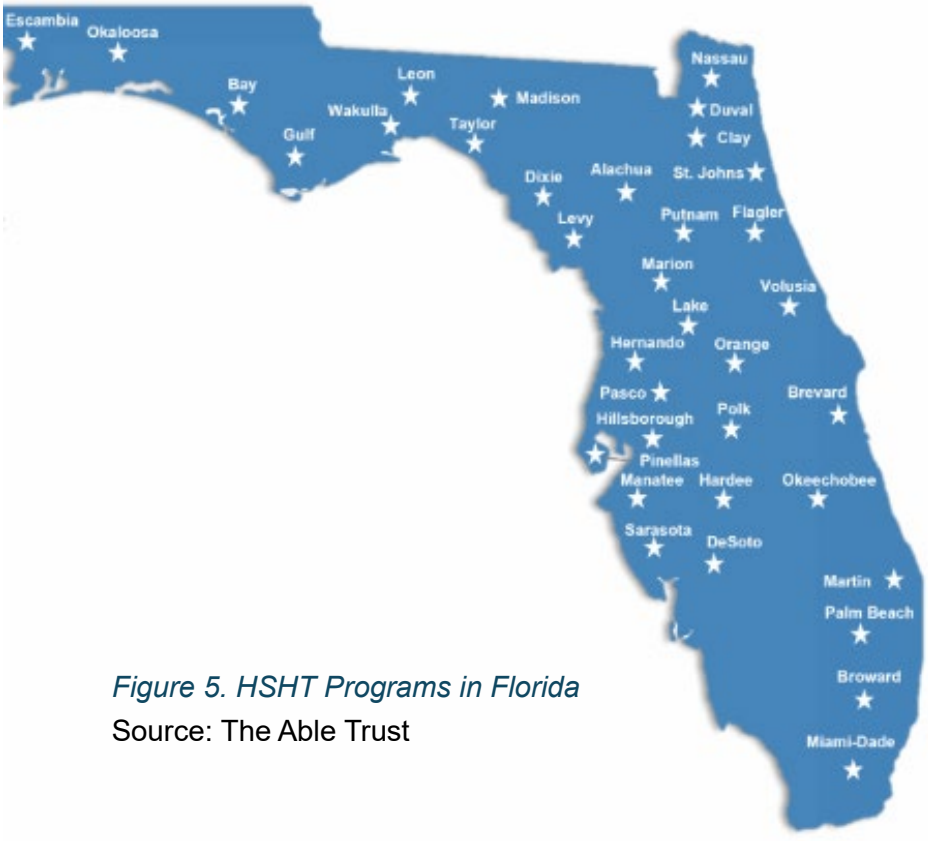


Figure 5. HSHT Programs in Florida
Source: The Able Trust

percent to universities, and 19 percent entered employment, with others enrolling in technical training or similar options, underscoring HSHT's role in expanding postsecondary participation and early labor-market engagement.[27]

Later outcomes reporting indicates that in academic year 2019 – 2020 HSHT again achieved approximately a 99 percent graduation rate with 83 percent of graduates planning to continue on to postsecondary education or employment, suggesting that these results are durable rather than one-year anomalies.[28] Data for 2022 – 2023 found that the Florida program served 1,371 students with disabilities across 115 high schools in 40 counties, achieving a 99% graduation rate for seniors compared to 88% for other Florida students with disabilities. Additionally, 88% of Florida HSHT graduates planned to enter postsecondary education or employment, significantly exceeding the 74% rate for other graduates with disabilities. A total of 852 students participated in career experiences including paid employment, internships, volunteering, or earning certifications.

A recent Helios Education Foundation release notes that while only about 28 percent of Florida students with disabilities pursue postsecondary education, 54 percent of HSHT students indicate plans for postsecondary study, which highlights a large aspiration and planning gap that the HSHT program appears to narrow.[29]

Over time, evidence from The Able Trust programs consistently shows that when students with disabilities have structured access to high-quality programming and work-based learning, their academic and workforce outcomes improve significantly. HSHT embeds school-based preparatory experiences and career preparation alongside work-based learning such as volunteering, paid employment, internships, school-based enterprises, and industry certifications.

New Initiatives Build on Existing Programming

The Able Trust's newer Futures in Focus initiative, based on HSHT and the Guideposts for Success, was initiated in 2024 for both high school and middle school students. It makes a CTE link more explicit, stating as core goals both "increasing student participation in school-based CTE courses" and "increasing high school graduates' enrollment in postsecondary options," while connecting students to Florida's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and local employers through campus visits, career-readiness workshops, and other hands-on experiences.

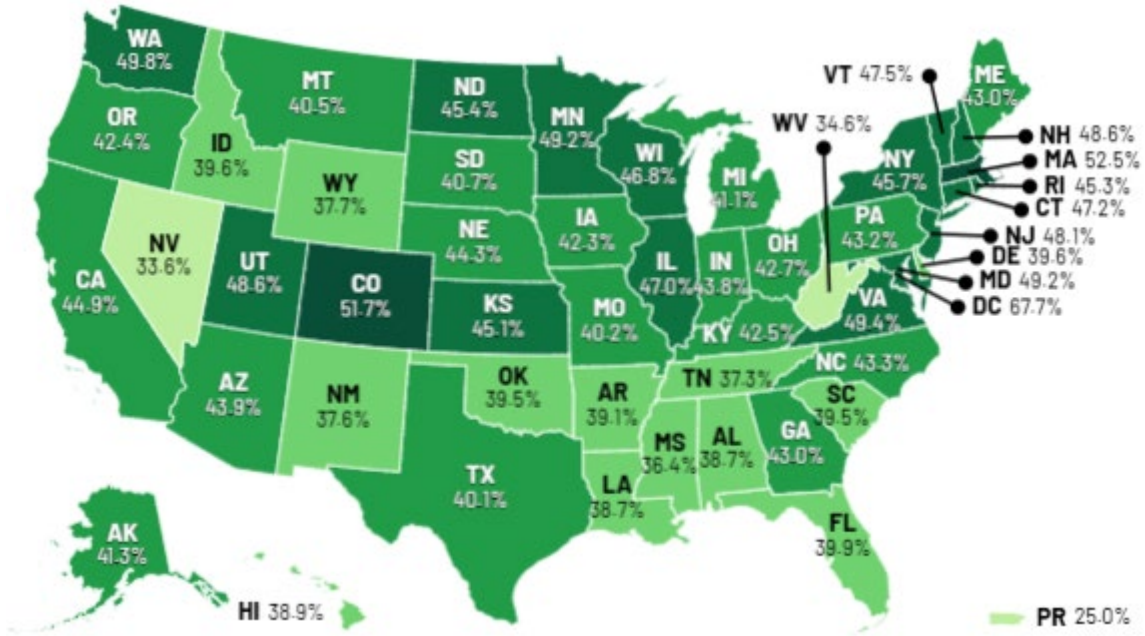
HSHT programming matches well with Florida's commitment to career education more generally. Florida's 2021 REACH Act and Credentials of Value framework establish a statewide expectation that education and workforce programs will guide learners—especially those facing barriers—into in-demand occupations by helping them earn high-value credentials and complete coherent

career pathways. HSHT directly operationalizes this agenda for high school students with disabilities by providing school-embedded transition services, CTE and work-based learning experiences, and coordinated postsecondary and FDOE/VR linkages that expose participants to the very certificates, industry credentials, and degree programs prioritized on the state's Master Credentials List.

In this sense, HSHT functions as a front-end implementation of the REACH and Credentials of Value goals for youth with disabilities; it increases graduation and postsecondary transition rates while connecting students to pathways that may culminate in credentials the state has identified as leading to middle- and high-wage employment. The HSHT program also matches well with Florida's Strengthening Alignment between Industry and Learning (SAIL) initiative.[30] The SAIL to 60 program seeks to lift the share of working-age adults in Florida with a high-value postsecondary certificate, degree, or training experience from its current 39.9 percent in 2024 to 60 percent by 2030.[31]

The Able Trust programs produce outcomes that align with state priorities and with national CTE research synthesized by Advance CTE and the National Center for Learning Disabilities, which found in a 2023 joint study that concentrated CTE participation is associated with improved graduation and employment outcomes for students with physical and learning disabilities and that applied STEM coursework can reduce dropout risk and

Figure 6. Share of State Residents Holding a Credential of Value



Source: https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/credentials-of-value

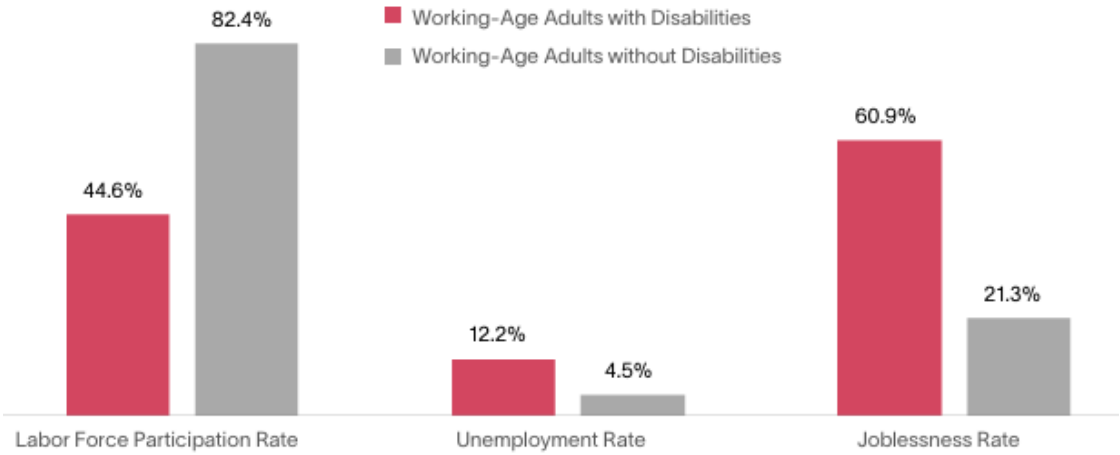
increase postsecondary enrollment for students with learning disabilities.[32] Taken together, The Able Trust's HSHT and Futures in Focus data and the broader CTE literature point to a coherent narrative: when students, especially students with disabilities, are intentionally connected to CTE pathways, work-based learning, and coordinated transition supports, they are more likely to finish high school, pursue postsecondary education, and enter in-demand careers.[33]

The Importance of Career and Technical Education

HSHT student participants engage in activities that align closely with known effective interventions. Program sites provide college and university tours, technical college visits, corporate site visits, job shadowing, guest speakers, and short internships or work experiences typically ranging from two to six weeks, including placements with employers arranged through CareerSource, FDOE/VR, or grant funding.[34] Many sites integrate industry-recognized credentialing into the program, adding concrete labor-market value to their high school experiences.[35] Programs also emphasize youth development and leadership through structured soft skills training, self-advocacy curricula, and leadership roles, to build teamwork, entrepreneurship, and public speaking ability.[36] HSHT acts as a connector among schools, VR, workforce boards, postsecondary institutions and community agencies, and engages families through transition planning and recognition events, consistent with the broad consensus emphasizing multisystem collaboration and family supports.[37]

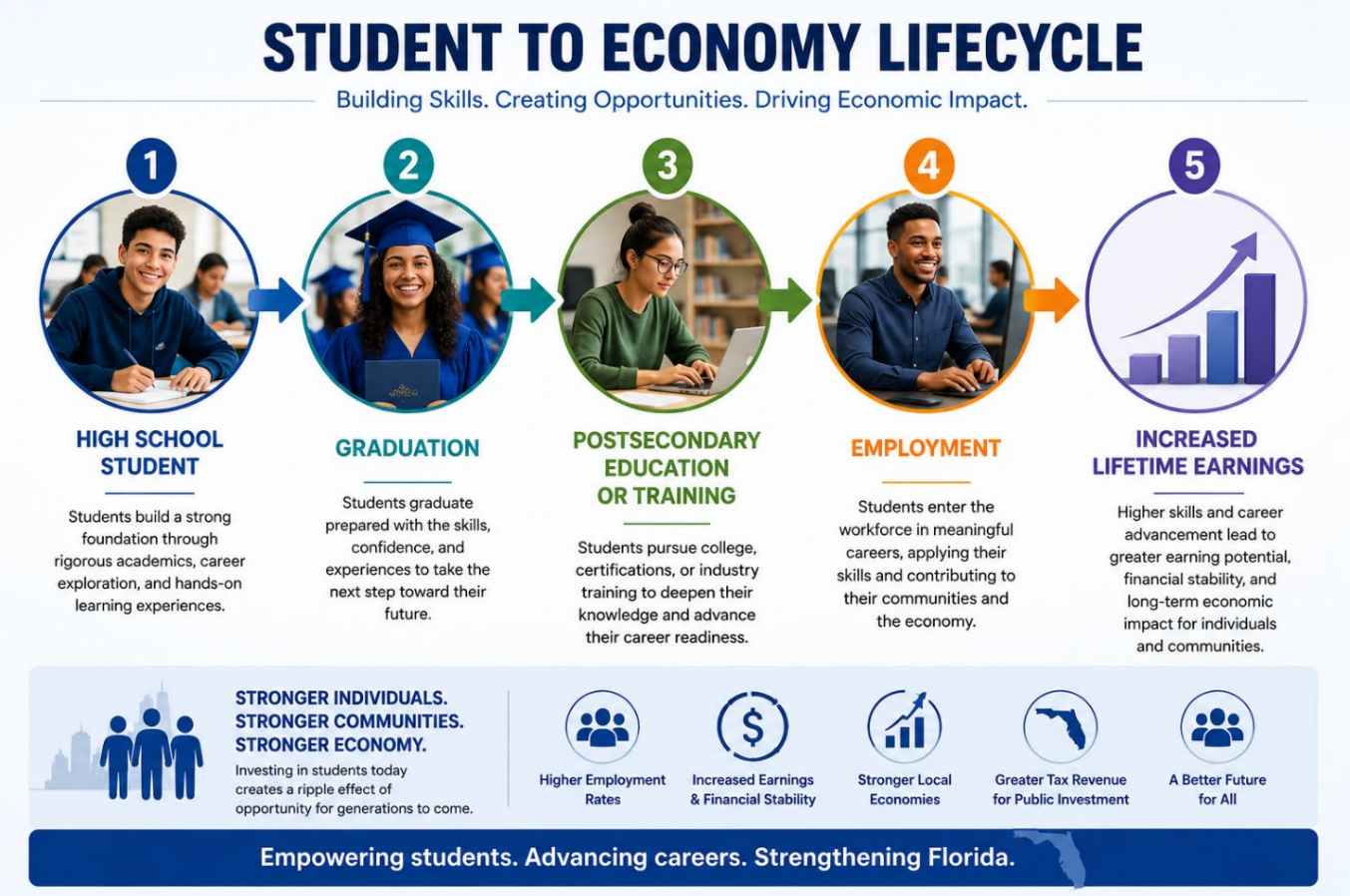
Florida's 2007 Career and Professional Education Act (CAPE Act) broke new ground in terms of a focus on, and incremental funding for, school districts that expanded their career and technical education programs. An analysis team from the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) did extensive work under U.S. Department of Education grants to evaluate the outcomes of the CAPE Act.[38] The RTI analysis found that on average, Florida students who earned certifications had fewer absences, earned more credits in 12th grade, and had higher high school graduation rates than students who did not. Certification earners were more likely than non-earners to enroll in a 2- or 4-year college after graduating from high school. Among those who enrolled in community college, certification earners were more likely to enroll immediately after their high school graduation, to persist into a second year of college, and to attain an associate degree.[39]

Figure 7. The Able Trust Summary of Participation, Unemployment, and Joblessness, 2021



Source: https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Industry-Analysis-and-Pathways-to-Career-Success-for-People-with-Disabilities-Aug2023-FINAL.pdf

The addition of a career and technical focus to the state's traditional high school college prep focus represents an increased emphasis on the career needs of students not oriented towards the traditional bachelor's degree with its two years of required general education followed by two or more years of specialized coursework. Within the set of Florida programs, HSHT is best understood as a secondary school-to-work transition intervention that combines strong work-based learning with explicit VR linkages, rather than an adult supported-employment or Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model. The Able Trust's HSHT procedures and public descriptions emphasize that the program is year-round, and explicitly based on the Guideposts, requiring school-based preparatory experiences, structured work-based learning, youth leadership opportunities, connecting activities to VR and postsecondary systems, and meaningful family involvement.[40] These features are consistent with the categories highlighted in the transition and workforce literature: school-to-work and transition programs for youth with disabilities, work-based learning embedded in secondary education, and enhanced VR-linked transition projects, all of which have been associated with improved early employment and education outcomes when implemented with fidelity.[41] HSHT's design decisions—such as incorporating internships, paid work experiences, career and technical education, and VR collaboration—mirror the core elements identified in national surveys and longitudinal studies as effective for improving full-time employment and job quality for youth with disabilities.[42]



Quantifying the Impact of HSHT

The benefits of HSHT and its precursor programs flow from higher high school graduation rates, earlier participation of students in the labor market or in further training, and higher wages due to better skills. This impact recurs annually, as one group of students graduates and moves into the labor market or into additional training and education, and another group takes its place.

Recent annual participation in HSHT has averaged around 1,250 students, with about 650 classified as seniors, and the rest spread between grades 9 – 11. Just over half of annual total participation is attributable to seniors, a group made up of both first-year seniors and those taking extra time to graduate. HSHT program leaders find that this imbalance between years is a regular occurrence, and is likely due to the fact that the program is extremely popular with students and families once it becomes known, but that students are not enrolling in HSHT until later in their high school career. An alternative explanation is that students may not opt into HSHT until families feel that alternative graduation paths may not be available. The academic literature is sparse on the details of the decision-making process in the families of students with disabilities.

Leaders have indicated they see a need to take enrollment to 5,000 in order to more fully meet the needs of Florida students with disabilities. The fact that this participation is not evenly distributed across the four years of high school is helping drive policy at The Able

Trust. There is a need to reach students earlier and make sure that the availability of high-quality CTE becomes something these families are aware of. The Able Trust is doing this with the introduction of the Futures in Focus program. Because the economic benefit of graduation with industry-recognized credentials is clear, as is the effectiveness of the Guidepost-based system, both approaches are needed.

How Large are the Positive Impacts of an HSHT-Like Program?

Theobald and colleagues use longitudinal data from Washington State to explore the relationship between CTE enrollment, inclusion in general education classrooms, and both high school and postsecondary outcomes for students with learning disabilities.[43] They define a "CTE concentration" as at least four credits in career and technical courses that build academic and technical skills relevant for future careers and independent living. Students with learning disabilities who complete such a concentration have higher rates of employment after graduation than observably similar peers with learning disabilities who do not concentrate. They also document that students with learning disabilities who spend more time in general education classrooms have higher on-time graduation rates, greater college attendance, and higher employment rates than similar peers with less inclusion.

Methodologically, the Theobald et al. study uses rich student-level covariates, including prior test scores, demographics, disability classification, poverty, and English-learner status to construct comparisons between students who are observably similar except for CTE participation. Students with disabilities who took at least one CTE course in 12th grade were 3 to 4 percentage points more likely to graduate on time than similar students who did not. By using the covariates to create groups with similar characteristics, the researchers are able to say that the estimated association between CTE concentration and outcomes approximates the true value-added of CTE for students with learning disabilities.[44]

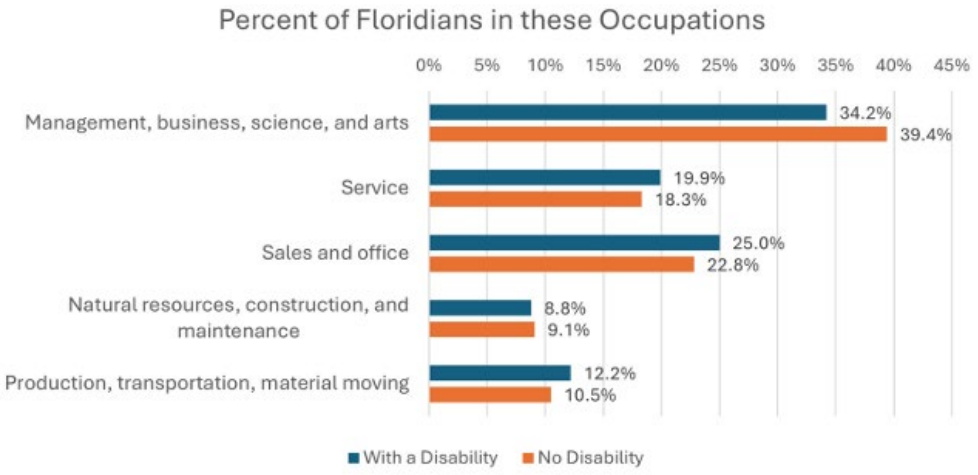
Brunner, Dougherty and Ross apply a different quasi-experimental technique by exploiting the oversubscribed nature of Connecticut's stand-alone CTE high schools and the existence of score-based admissions thresholds.[45] Students with identified disabilities apply to a statewide network of CTE high schools, and admission is determined by a composite application score; students just above a school's cutoff are much more likely to receive offers and attend than students just below it.[46] The authors treat these cutoffs as generating a natural experiment and employ statistical analysis to look at differences in graduation and earnings outcomes for those who were accepted versus those who weren't.

For male students with disabilities, they find that attending a CTE high school causes more than a six-percentage-point increase in on-time high school graduation and sizable improvements in long-term labor-market outcomes: approximately 25 percent higher

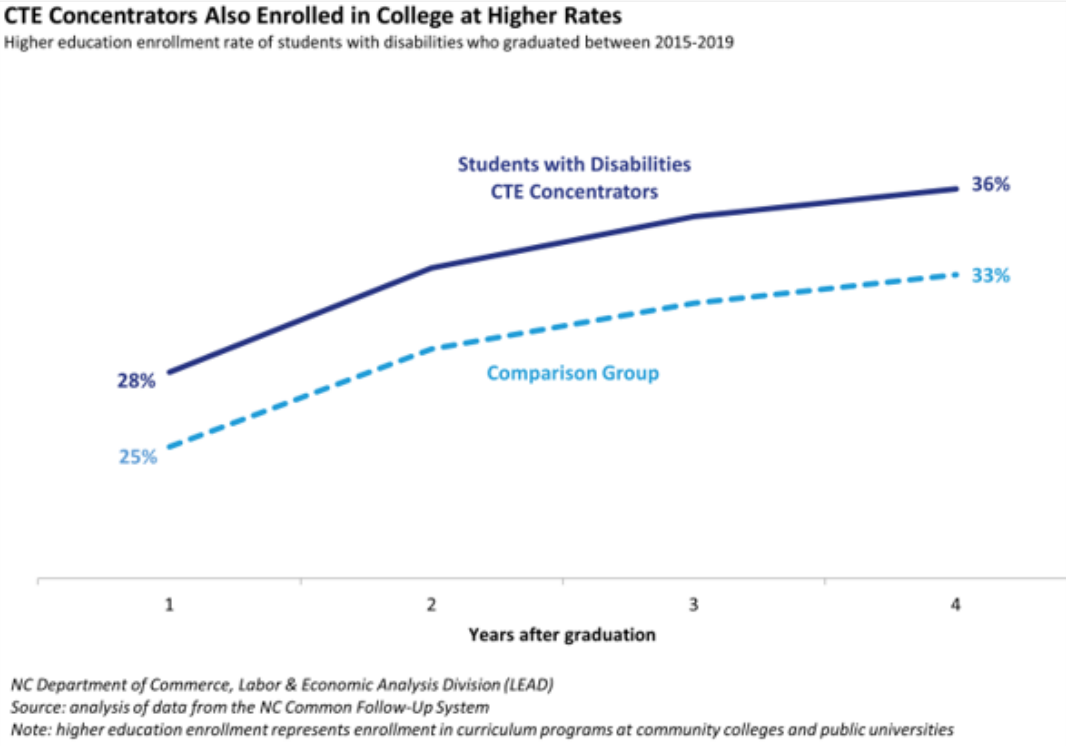
quarterly earnings overall, roughly 30 percent higher quarterly earnings when restricting to work at age 22 or older, and nearly three additional quarters with earnings observed over the follow-up period. Attendance at a CTE high school also increases 10th-grade test scores and time spent with non-disabled peers, suggesting that CTE participation in this setting is coupled with stronger academic instruction and inclusion rather than academic tracking. Because the selection algorithm creates quasi-random variation in admission around the cutoff, it mitigates both observed and unobserved selection bias for students near the threshold, giving these estimates a strong causal interpretation.

Glennie et al. (2024) examined data on Florida students from the Florida EDW to assess the importance of earning industry certifications on high school graduation.[47] This paper finds that earning an industry certification in Florida high schools is associated with a meaningfully higher probability of on-time graduation, even after adjusting for extensive student and school covariates. After balancing on observed characteristics, certification earners display higher high school graduation rates than comparable non-earners, indicating a positive association between certification attainment and completion.[48] The effect is particularly relevant for students with higher predicted dropout risk, suggesting certifications may be one lever for improving outcomes among more vulnerable groups. The authors interpret the results as evidence that structured opportunities to earn industry credentials can support persistence and graduation—potentially by increasing engagement, providing concrete goals, and signaling labor-market value.

Figure 8. Florida Employment in Selected Sectors by Disability Status

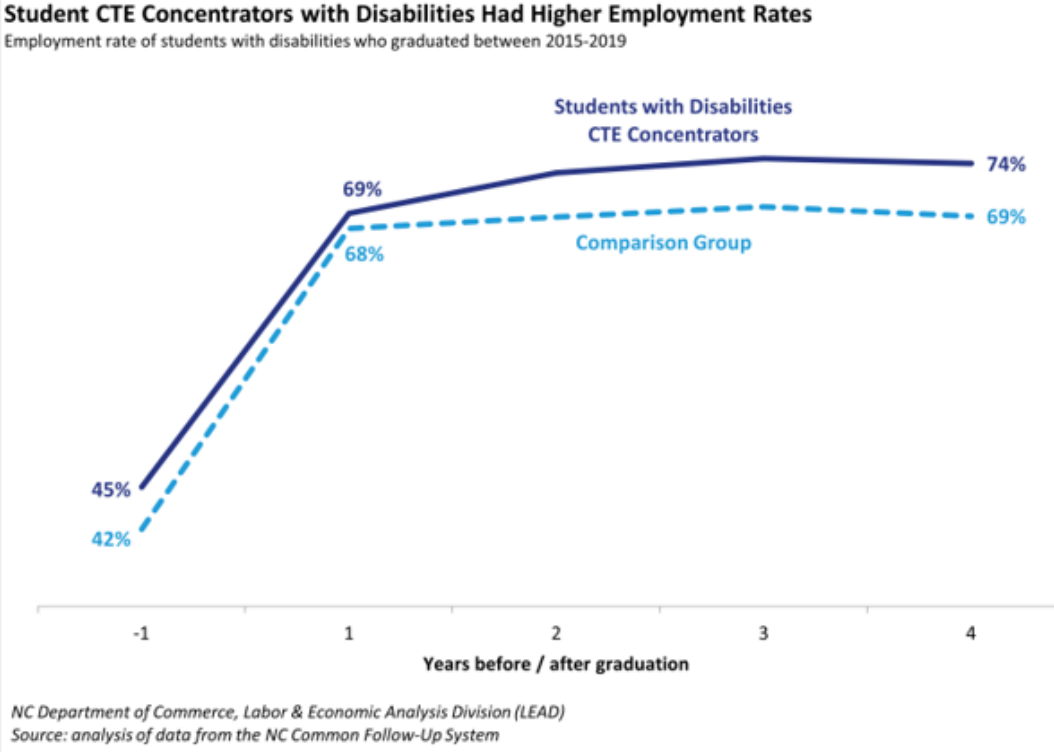


Source: https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025-Final-Census-Data-Infographic-Final.pdf



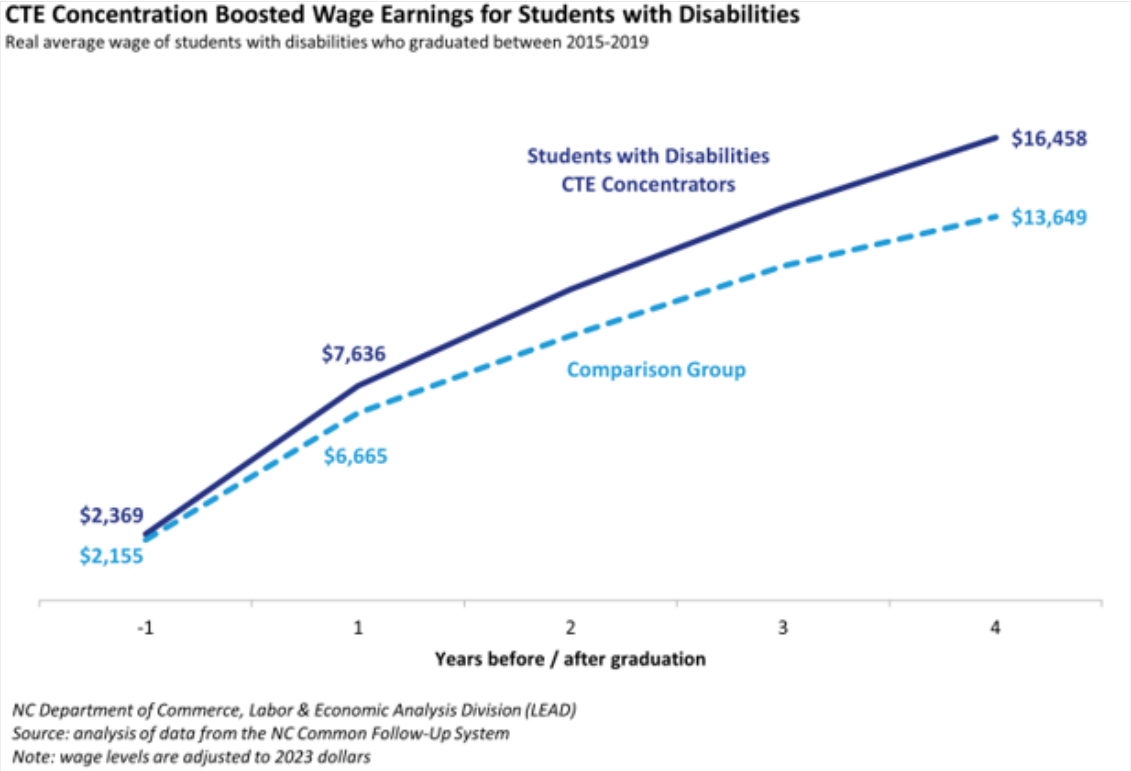
Guarine's work for the North Carolina Department of Commerce takes the matching logic a step further by explicitly deploying propensity score matching to study CTE concentration among high school graduates with disabilities.[49] Using administrative data on 9,205 graduates with identified disabilities from the high school classes of 2015 through 2019, the analysis compares graduates who meet the state's definition of CTE "concentrator" (typically a progression or stacking of several related courses) with those who do not concentrate in CTE. The author estimates propensity scores based on a wide range of observable characteristics—demographics, disability status, prior achievement, and other schooling variables—and matches CTE concentrators to non-concentrators with similar propensity scores to create a balanced comparison group.

Guarine finds that CTE concentrators had a higher propensity to be employed (74% vs 69%) and were more likely to be employed in the higher-wage fields of construction, health care, or manufacturing, while those graduates without the CTE concentration were more likely to be employed in leisure and hospitality.



Wage outcomes were also different, with CTE concentrators having average wages (in inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars) that were $2,809 higher four years after graduation than those without the CTE focus.[50] They were also more likely to be enrolled in college four years after graduation (at 36% vs 33%).[51] The dataset is constructed using only high school graduates with disabilities, including both CTE concentrators and non-concentrators, and the wage differentials are estimated between these two groups. Because the author then compares outcomes after adjusting for possible differences between those who opt into CTE and those who do not, we take these estimates to be among the most applicable in the relevant literature to those Florida students with disabilities who opt into HSHT.

After matching on these characteristics, those in the CTE concentrators group exhibit higher on-time graduation rates, higher employment, and better early-career earnings than their matched non-concentrator peers. This design directly addresses self-selection into CTE on the basis of observed covariates, improving on naïve comparisons that could conflate CTE participation with pre-existing differences. While this propensity score matching process cannot fully control for unobserved factors, such as intrinsic motivation or nuanced differences in family involvement, it substantially enhances the credibility of estimated CTE impacts relative to simple regression or raw comparisons.



Which Model is Most Appropriate for Florida?

The several approaches used in these studies offer a methodological template for evaluating HSHT's value-added in Florida. HSHT is a voluntary, high-touch program that focuses on youth with disabilities, pairing intensive transition planning, mentoring and work-based learning with a CTE-heavy curriculum. Florida students who participate are likely to differ from non-participants in motivation, family advocacy, and access to supportive schools, so a rigorous HSHT evaluation would need to begin by assembling a statewide administrative dataset covering students with disabilities, their participation (or not) in HSHT, their CTE course-taking, and their outcomes. Drawing on Guarine's example, researchers could use propensity score matching or similar matching techniques to construct a comparison group of non-HSHT students with disabilities who resemble HSHT participants on observable factors such as baseline achievement, disability category, socioeconomic status, prior CTE exposure, and school characteristics.

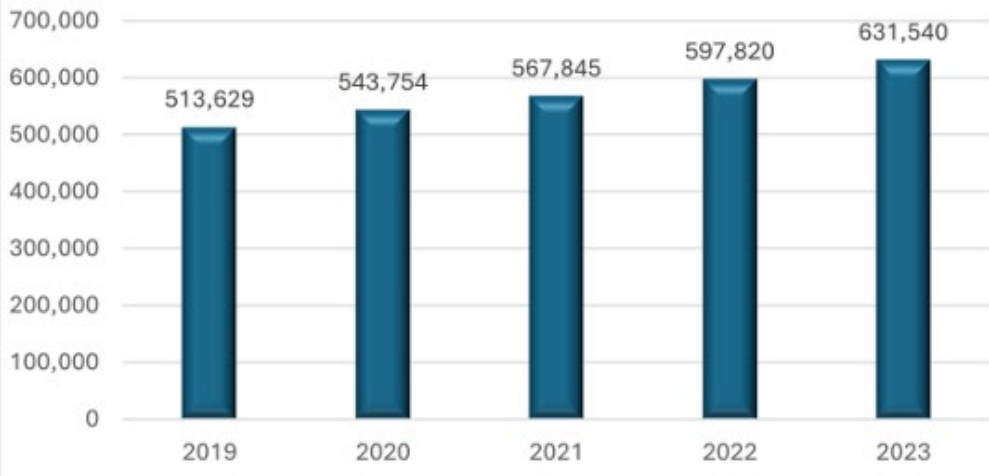
In settings where HSHT has limited seats or uses explicit eligibility criteria (for example, a minimum GPA, specific disability categories, or school-level nomination processes), those thresholds could be exploited in a design paralleling the Connecticut work, to isolate local causal effects for students at the margins of program access. The Washington study demonstrates how longitudinal controls can sharpen estimates, while the North Carolina and Connecticut studies show how

to further reduce bias and move from associations toward causal claims.

Glennie et al.'s findings strongly reinforce the Guideposts 2.0 foundation that underlies Florida's HSHT program by showing that structured opportunities to earn industry-recognized credentials can boost high school persistence and graduation, precisely by making learning feel relevant, thus giving students concrete, valued milestones, and clarifying pathways into postsecondary education and work. This is directly aligned with Guideposts 2.0 emphases on school-based preparatory experiences and career preparation/work-based learning, where rigorous, standards-based coursework is deliberately connected to real credentials and career options, and where young people see a clear line from today's classes to tomorrow's jobs. In Florida's HSHT model, those credential pathways are embedded within a broader set of Guidepost supports—youth development and leadership, connecting activities, and family engagement—that sustain motivation and ensure that the promise of industry certifications translates into real transitions to college, training, and competitive employment for youth with disabilities.

Substantively, the results from these several studies align closely with the outcomes the Florida HSHT seeks to influence. In Washington, Theobald et al. report that students with learning disabilities who complete CTE concentrations have higher employment rates after high school than observably similar students with learning disabilities who do not concentrate, and that greater inclusion in general education is associated with higher on-time graduation, higher college enrollment, and higher employment. Guarine finds that in North Carolina, CTE concentrators with disabilities experience higher graduation rates, higher employment, and stronger early-career earnings than matched non-concentrators. Brunner, Dougherty and Ross show that, at least for male students with disabilities in Connecticut, attending a CTE high school causes large improvements in 10th-grade test scores, on-time graduation, labor-force attachment, and earnings relative to applicants just below the admissions threshold. Across these contexts and methods, the pattern is consistent: when students with disabilities engage in coherent, career-aligned CTE sequences—especially in academically rigorous environments that include students with and without disabilities—their educational and labor market outcomes improve meaningfully.

Figure 9. Floridians Age 16 and Over with a Disability Who Are Working



Source: https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025-Final-Census-Data-Infographic-Final.pdf

While the magnitudes reported in these studies differ, they all indicate positive impacts in the outcomes measures indicative of success. Brunner, Dougherty and Ross estimate that male students with disabilities attending Connecticut's CTE high schools see roughly 25 percent higher quarterly earnings overall, rising to about 30 percent for quarters worked at age 22 or older, alongside more quarters with earnings. Because their RD design has strong internal validity for students near the admissions cutoffs, this provides a reasonable benchmark for the potential causal earnings premium associated with robust CTE participation in a high-quality setting. Guarine's PSM-based results also indicate higher employment and better early earnings for CTE concentrators with disabilities relative to matched non-concentrators, suggesting that a positive earnings premium is not unique to Connecticut's system. Theobald et al's finding that CTE concentration is associated with higher employment, while not strictly causal, points in the same direction and underscores that such gains appear in a general comprehensive high school environment as well.

Likely Florida Impacts of HSHT

In the case of Florida, the estimated fourth-year annual earnings increment for CTE concentrators with disabilities provides a plausible and conservative scenario representing the causal wage impact on Florida HSHT participants. The underlying North Carolina study uses rich administrative data to do propensity score matching to isolate a causal effect of intensive CTE participation for students with disabilities.[52] Florida's HSHT, in turn, is explicitly designed to link to the Guideposts for Success model, providing high-touch transition services for students with disabilities that embeds paid

work experiences, rigorous coursework, and linkages to Vocational Rehabilitation and workforce partners. That alignment in mechanisms, population, and observed early outcomes, including very high graduation rates and strong postsecondary and workforce entry, supports treating the NC estimate as a reasonable estimate for what Florida HSHT graduates could be expected to achieve. These features can be seen in the high correlation scores, as shown in the table below, for HSHT participants in Q4, 2025.

Florida Outcomes

Here we assume that HSHT's combination of CTE and high-touch supports produces an annual earnings premium of $3,041 for each HSHT completer relative to a matched control group of students with disabilities who do not participate but are otherwise similar.

To calculate the value of this earnings premium over time, we use information about how long people with disabilities who work actually stay in the workforce. Rather than assuming a uniform worklife matching the average experience of all workers in the economy, we instead incorporate worklife-expectancy estimates calculated for individuals with disabilities. These estimates show an average time in the workforce for individuals with disabilities of 26.4 years for males and 21.9 years for females.[53] We can apply the observed gender mix among HSHT graduates, with 63 percent male and 37 percent female. This yields an expected worklife of roughly 24.7 years for the typical HSHT completer.

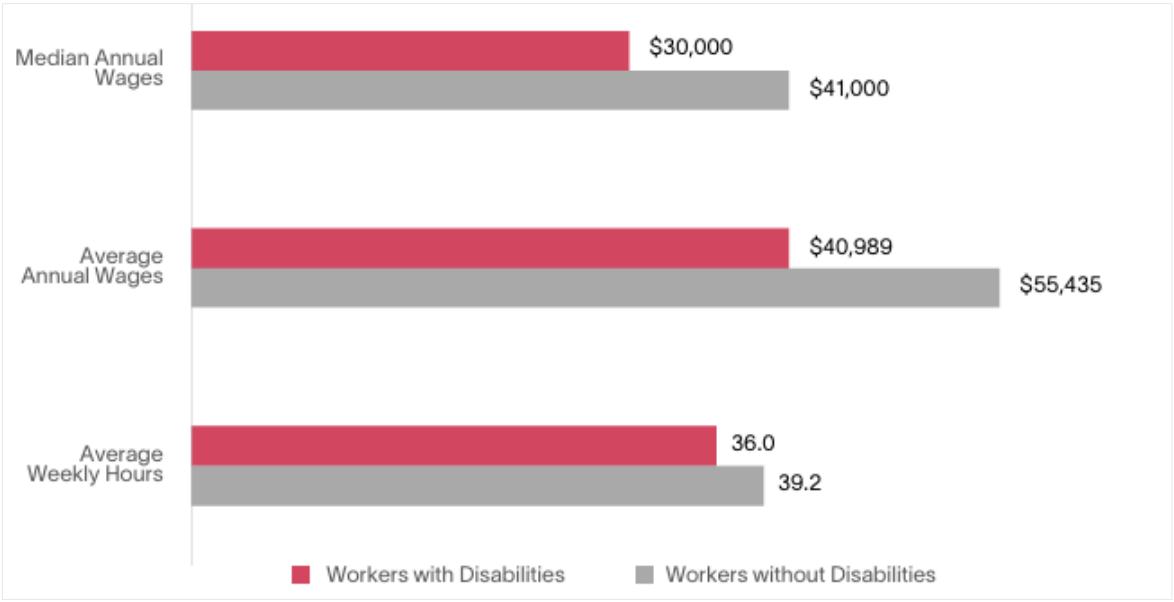
Using the $3,041 wage differential estimated from the North Carolina data, along with the likely time in the workforce described above, we can calculate that the average graduate would gain on the order of $3,041 per year for approximately 24.7 years, or about $75,113 in additional undiscounted lifetime real earnings over the period considered. But to more accurately calculate changes in this premium over time, we examine both the change in the nominal wage rates as they grow over time, and the impact of inflation,

Predictor Variable	Correlation with Post-Secondary Enrollment Rate	Correlation with Deferral Adjusted Post-Secondary Enrollment Rate
All Guideposts for Success Events	0.31	0.28
Career Preparation and Work-Based Experiences	0.17	0.19
Connecting Activities	0.35	0.27
Family Involvement Activities and Supports	0.23	0.28
Youth Development and Leadership Experiences	0.38	0.36
School Based Preparatory Experiences	0.07	-0.01
Q1 Guidepost Events	0.28	0.23
Q2 Guidepost Events	0.33	0.33
Q3 Guidepost Events	0.19	0.19
Q4 Guidepost Events	0.34	0.28
Completed Career Experiences Rate	0.15	0.24
Exposure to Post-Secondary Education Activities	0.15	0.11

which erodes the purchasing power of wages over time. To do this, we apply an after-inflation growth rate of wages of 1.2 percent per year, reflecting the average wage growth rate after accounting for inflation for non-supervisory workers in the U.S. economy. Because the wage growth rate is a bit higher than the inflation rate, this calculation yields a present money value that is slightly higher than the unadjusted, or nominal, $75,113 shown above. The present money value in 2026, i.e., adjusted for both likely wage growth rates and likely inflation rates, is $90,918 per HSHT completer. This is intended to reflect the premium due to HSHT participation when comparing matched pairs of similar students with disabilities, one of whom did HSHT while the other did not.

The following figure presents estimated wage differences between workers with disabilities and workers without disabilities, with median wages for workers with disabilities being about $11,000 lower than median wages overall. While this comparison is informative, it does not give us the correct analysis of wage differences. Use of the premium as calculated in North Carolina allows us to compare wages for workers with disabilities who completed a CTE-intensive program with wages for workers with disabilities who had not completed such a CTE program. It is therefore the more appropriate measure for outcomes from the HSHT program.

Figure 10. Florida Average 2021 Earning by Disability Status



Source: https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Industry-Analysis-and-Pathways-to-Career-Success-for-People-with-Disabilities-Aug2023-FINAL.pdf

Given a typical graduating HSHT cohort at current levels of enrollment of 662 students, the cumulative incremental earnings for that single year cohort would be substantial. Multiplying the per-student lifetime gain by the 662 graduates from the most recent school year implies that one HSHT graduating class would be expected to generate roughly $60.2 million in additional discounted earnings over the combined worklives of that year's graduating cohort. Framed this way, the $3,041 annual earnings premium, combined with gender-specific worklife expectancies and the actual male–female composition of HSHT graduates, provides a conservative but concrete estimate of the long-run private earnings benefits to HSHT completers associated with the program's current scale.

Injecting these additional wages into the Florida economy every year will have spillover benefits. Standard multiplier models suggest that this additional amount of wages paid will translate into a total spending impact that generates a total increment to wages of $96.3 million.

To examine the impact of the proposed program expansion to 5,000 students, we assume HSHT will in the short run keep the same distribution of students across grade levels as is seen today.[54] Our calculations are that achieving this increase would generate some $290 million in additional household income to Florida families, above and beyond the economic impacts seen from today's HSHT program, generating as much as $19 million in additional general sales tax revenue for the state. It is likely that the program expansion to create these new jobs could be done for substantially less, thereby generating a positive net economic impact from the expansion of the program.

These wage-based estimates likely understate HSHT's total economic contribution. First, because the wage gains compare a group of students with disabilities that participate in HSHT (the treatment group) to a group of otherwise similar students (as determined by propensity scores similar to the matched students in the treatment group) who did not participate in HSHT, we are comparing one group of high school graduates with another group of high school graduates. Thus our estimates do not explicitly incorporate the gains associated with the increased likelihood of graduating that HSHT may create. Brunner, Dougherty and Ross find that attending a CTE high school increases on-time graduation by more than six percentage points for male students with disabilities. The broader earnings literature indicates that high school graduation, compared to dropping out, yields significant lifetime earnings gains—often on the order of 20–30 percent—before considering reduced unemployment risk; these magnitudes are consistent with national syntheses and federal labor-market statistics. If HSHT's high-touch environment and CTE sequence increase graduation rates for students with disabilities by even a few percentage points relative to a matched comparison group, then the incremental earnings associated solely with moving students from non-completion to completion

would augment the wage premium attributed here to CTE participation.

Second, increased labor-force attachment—reflected in the additional quarters with earnings that Brunner and colleagues document—reduces spells of unemployment and likely lowers reliance on public assistance and disability benefits, generating fiscal savings to the state that are not included in the simple private-earnings calculations.

A third factor found in the literature emphasizes that sustained employment is associated with better outcomes across multiple dimensions of life for people with disabilities. Studies of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities find that being employed, especially in mainstream, competitive jobs, is significantly linked to higher quality-of-life scores in domains such as life satisfaction, productivity, independence, and social belonging, compared with being unemployed or in segregated work settings. Among these findings is that paid work during high school causally increases the likelihood of post-school employment for students with severe disabilities, reinforcing correlational findings that early work experience predicts later work and greater economic self-sufficiency. In broader adult populations with disabilities, observational studies show that employment is associated with improved mental health and reduced use of mental-health services and medications, with working 15–29 or more hours per week linked to 18–22 percent lower mental-healthcare use compared with not working.[55]

In implementing this analysis, we recognize that workers with disabilities may sort into industry sectors that are distinct from the pattern seen with non-disabled workers. Here we use the study done for The Able Trust in 2021 by Lightcast, a consultant specializing in labor market data analysis. The table below shows the estimated distribution of workers with disabilities across sectors of the economy. These sector weights, and the differential between wages across sectors, can inform the economic impact analysis of the proposed program expansion to 5,000 students annually. If participation in the HSHT program has the effects seen in North Carolina, Florida's workforce composition for HSHT graduates may look more like the national, with more workers participating in healthcare and the manufacturing sectors than is seen currently.[56]

Figure 11. Share of Workforce with Disability by Sector, FL and US

Industry (2-Digit NAICS)	Rank	% of FL Workforce with Disabilities	Rank	% of US Workforce with Disabilities
Retail Trade	1	13.9%	2	12.3%
Health Care and Social Assistance	2	12.5%	1	15.7%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	3	7.9%	5	6.4%
Accommodation and Food Services	4	7.6%	6	6.0%
Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	5	7.6%	9	5.2%
Construction	6	7.6%	4	7.0%
Transportation and Warehousing	7	6.0%	7	5.8%
Manufacturing	8	5.7%	3	10.9%
Other Services (Except Public Administration)	9	4.9%	10	5.0%
Educational Services	10	4.8%	8	5.5%
Finance and Insurance	11	4.4%	12	3.6%
Active-Duty Military	12	3.6%	11	3.6%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	13	2.8%	15	1.9%
Public Administration	14	2.6%	13	3.0%
Wholesale Trade	15	2.3%	14	2.1%
Information	16	2.2%	16	1.8%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	17	2.0%	17	1.7%
Utilities	18	0.9%	19	0.9%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	19	0.6%	18	1.2%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	20	0.2%	21	0.1%
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	21	0.0%	20	0.4%

Source: https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Industry-Analysis-and-Pathways-to-Career-Success-for-People-with-Disabilities-Aug2023-FINAL.pdf

In practice, an evaluation of HSHT that aspires to high-caliber causal inference would adopt a multi-layered strategy grounded in these three precedents. Analysts would first draw on statewide administrative data to match HSHT participants to non-participants with disabilities using PSM or related matching algorithms, ensuring balance on a rich set of covariates and thus reducing observable selection bias, as was done in Guarine's analysis that provides our $3,041 estimate. They would then estimate regression models of graduation, employment, and earnings outcomes that incorporate these matches along with additional controls, much like Theobald et al., to refine effect estimates and explore heterogeneity by disability category, baseline achievement, and CTE field.[1] Where the program's design or implementation provides natural cutoffs—such as limited seats at some HSHT sites, distance thresholds, or eligibility rules—researchers would embed RD or difference-in-discontinuities designs, analogous to the Connecticut approach, to estimate local causal impacts and benchmark HSHT's effectiveness against the high-quality CTE systems in the literature.[2] By combining these methods, Florida could produce robust estimates of HSHT's value-added to graduation, labor-force participation, and earnings, and thereby substantiate the claim that its high-touch, CTE-rich model based on the Guideposts framework generates substantial positive economic returns for participants and for the state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Florida's implementation of HSHT through The Able Trust represents a mature, three-decade-old transition initiative that closely follows national research and policy guidance while producing consistently superior short-term outcomes for students with disabilities. Its design embodies the DOL Guideposts for Success and aligns with the evidence-based predictors identified by Test, Mazzotti, and subsequent scholars, particularly in its emphasis on school-based preparatory experiences, paid and credential-bearing work-based learning, youth leadership, VR-linked connecting activities, and family support.[57] For the Legislature, HSHT offers a clear case of a program with demonstrated educational and early labor-market benefits, leveraged by public–private partnerships and grounded in a strong, though still evolving, research base. Continued and expanded investment, coupled with deeper longitudinal evaluation and attention to emerging predictors such as technology skills and psychological empowerment, would position Florida not only to sustain HSHT's high performance, but also to contribute nationally to the next generation of rigorous evidence on what works to improve labor-market outcomes for youth with disabilities.[58]

When Florida's administrative and outcome data are viewed through the research lens, HSHT appears to be a strategically designed intervention that both implements and amplifies the strongest predictors of post-school success for students with disabilities. The program's exceptionally high graduation rates (≈99 percent), high rates of postsecondary education or employment among graduates (≥83 percent), and growing enrollment suggest that HSHT is helping Florida close outcome gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.[59] Independent review by FDOE's Inspector General has affirmed that The Able Trust and VR maintain adequate internal controls and robust oversight, while media coverage and partner organizations such as AdventHealth, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, and Helios Education Foundation have highlighted HSHT as an effective, scalable model worthy of continued and expanded investment.[60] At the same time, audits have identified site-level compliance issues around internship delivery, and the broader research literature points to the importance of continual methodological improvement and longitudinal tracking to sharpen estimates of HSHT's causal impact on wages, employment stability, and degree completion.[61]

The need for expansion of HSHT is strong. From 2012 to 2024, Florida's ages 5 – 17 year old population with a disability grew by 46 percent, while the Florida population with a disability for all other age groups combined grew by 25.8 percent. Over the same time period, total U.S. population (including able and disabled) grew by 8.6 percent, so that the growth rate in Florida's ages 5 – 17 population with a disability, at 46.0 percent, was over five times as fast.

High-quality analysis from other states comparing matched pairs of students with disabilities finds that those who participated in career-focused program such as HSHT had higher rates of employment, at 74 percent vs. 69 percent, and also had a higher rate of students who went on to college and further training, at 36 percent vs. 33 percent. The same analysis found a 20.6 percent wage premium accrued by the fourth year following graduation to those graduates with disabilities who participated in the HSHT-like program relative to similar students with disabilities who did not.

This increment to expected earnings from HSHT is not enough to erase the wage differential between students with disabilities and those without disabilities, but will clearly be large enough to generate a strongly positive ROI per dollar of program cost to the State. In Florida, the per-student lifetime earnings attributable to HSHT for the 662 graduates from the most recent school year implies that one HSHT graduating class would be expected to generate roughly $60.2 million in additional discounted earnings over the combined worklives of that year's graduating cohort.

Application of standard multiplier models to these higher annual wages for Florida HSHT graduates suggests that this additional $60.2 million in wages paid will translate into a consumer spending impact that generates a total increment to wages of $96.3 million.

Achievement by The Able Trust of the proposed growth to 5,000 students served per year would generate some $290 million in additional household income annually to Florida families, above and beyond the annual economic impacts seen from today's HSHT program. This is expected to generate as much as $19 million in additional general sales tax revenue for the state each year, well offsetting the incremental cost to the State of funding such an expansion.

Appendix: The Importance of Controlling for Selection Bias

What is Sample Selection Bias and Why does it Matter Here?

Methodological work has recognized that the need to understand whether HSHT makes a meaningful difference must be approached carefully. This is because those who participate may be different in some meaningful way from those who do not. Here we want to know whether HSHT "causes" better outcomes, or whether HSHT just attracts students who were already on a better path. Think of comparing two groups of students with disabilities. One is made up of those students with disabilities who choose not to participate in HSHT, while the other group is made up of those who chose to participate. We need a way to make a fair comparison between an intervention group (i.e., those who opt in to HSHT) and a control group (similar students in every sense except they choose not to do HSHT) so that if there is a difference in outcomes between the two groups (e.g., in graduation rates, or in workforce participation), it is likely to be the intervention that is the proximate cause of the observed differences in outcomes.

As an example, consider that in HSHT, students typically don't get in via lottery. If they did, then we might expect lottery winners to be pretty much the same as lottery losers in terms of socio-demographic and other characteristics associated with behavior and capabilities. Instead, schools, families, and students choose whether to participate in HSHT or not. It could be that those who choose HSHT have more supportive families, or better grades, or be in better-resourced schools. If you simply compare HSHT graduates to all other students with disabilities, you'll almost certainly find higher graduation and employment rates but you can't tell whether that result is driven by the skills conveyed through HSHT, or whether it was simply the kind of student who ends up in HSHT.

Key Research Gaps for HSHT Analysis

Despite strong programmatic outcome data, peer-reviewed academic studies examining HSHT effectiveness using rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs remain notably absent from the literature. The program evaluations rely primarily on descriptive statistics and pre-post comparisons without matched control groups, limiting causal inference about program effects.

The program outcomes are tracked through annual reports and surveys rather than longitudinal research studies linking program participation to long-term employment and earnings outcomes using administrative data sources. This represents an opportunity for research using state education and workforce data systems to conduct more rigorous return-on-investment analyses.

There are multiple ways to handle the possibility that HSHT participants are different from non-participants. One way would be to set up an experiment in which a large group of students with disabilities is recruited to participate in an experiment, and half are randomly assigned to do HSHT with the other half randomly assigned to not do HSHT.

Another way would be via lottery. If there are many applicants for limited number available spaces in an HSHT program, then an analyst could begin by collecting socioeconomic and other descriptors for each student in order to match pairs of those who participated in HSHT and those who did not. Looking at a database of all students, a participating student would be matched with a similar non-participating student, and then the analyst would test to see if outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, employment rates) differed meaningfully between participants (those who won the participation lottery) and non-participants (those who did not win the participation lottery).

Yet another way is to create a two-step process, first estimating the propensity of each given student with disabilities to participate in an HSHT program and then using that propensity score as one of the estimators in a multi-variate statistical analysis. The analyst first builds a model that predicts how likely each student is to enroll and participate in HSHT based on things that can be measured ahead of actually enrolling (disability category, 9th-grade test scores, attendance, demographics, IEP status, etc.). That predicted probability is the “propensity score.” A student with a 0.70 score is someone the model predicts had a 70% chance of being in HSHT, given their background. Then, for each HSHT student, the analyst would search through the student characteristics dataset to find one or more non-HSHT students with a very similar propensity score. These would be students who look the same on all those background factors and were thus about equally likely to participate, but didn’t. The analysis would then compare outcomes (graduation, employment, wages) only between these matched pairs of people, one of whom was in the control group (i.e., did not enroll) and one of whom was in the intervention group (i.e., did enroll).62

It may well be the case, for example, that the observed correlation of “paid work during high school” and “successful transition to the labor market” is driven by the fact that only those students who are capable of successful work in high school are then able to consider labor force participation post high-school, and it would be an error to attribute post-high school work to program intervention providing such an experience. Instead, one should compare students with disabilities in a control group with similarly qualified students in an intervention group in order to assess the causal influence of the intervention. This will help avoid falsely attributing causation to a particular intervention any time that a correlation is observed.

Beyond these syntheses, a growing body of studies using propensity score matching and related techniques has examined specific program types and components that resemble HSHT. For example, evaluations of enhanced, contract-based VR transition programs—where secondary students receive targeted, coordinated services including work experiences, benefits counseling, and intensive case management—have found that participants have higher odds of successful VR employment closures, with estimated odds ratios around 1.4 compared with similar youth receiving usual services, indicating a meaningful but not infinite causal effect.63 Other work has applied PSM to examine the impact of early paid work experiences, summer work-based learning programs, and participation in career and technical education on employment and earnings in the

years immediately after high school for youth with disabilities, generally finding positive impacts that persist after balancing on key covariates such as disability category, prior achievement, and demographics.64 While these studies are diverse in setting and population, they tend to reinforce the conclusion that well-designed work-based learning and structured transition programs yield better labor-market outcomes than business-as-usual services, supporting HSHT's strategy as a high-ROI model.

At the same time, the methodological literature underscores important limitations and areas for caution. Both the 2016 and 2021 predictor updates emphasize that the majority of studies remain correlational and that even studies using PSM or other quasi-experimental methods cannot fully eliminate selection bias, particularly where unobserved characteristics such as motivation or parental advocacy may influence both program participation and outcomes.65 The evidence base is also uneven across predictors; while paid employment and CTE participation are well supported, there are fewer rigorous studies on community-based instruction, certain forms of interagency collaboration, and specific family-involvement strategies, leading reviewers to classify these as promising but not definitively evidence-based.66 For policymakers, this means that HSHT's strongest claims to high ROI rest on its alignment with the best-supported predictors—paid work, CTE, inclusion, self-determination, and high expectations—rather than on every component.

To estimate HSHT's value-added credibly, an evaluation must address the core problem of selection bias: students with disabilities who participate in high-touch, CTE-oriented programs are not randomly drawn from the broader population, but often differ in motivation, family support, school context, and prior achievement. Three recent studies—Theobald et al. on Washington State's students with learning disabilities; Brunner, Dougherty and Ross on Connecticut's oversubscribed CTE high schools; and Guarine's analysis of CTE concentration among North Carolina graduates with disabilities—illustrate how rigorous quasi-experimental and matching methods can approximate causal estimates of CTE's effects on graduation, labor-force participation, and earnings for students with disabilities. Their methodological approaches—regression with rich controls, propensity score matching (PSM), and regression discontinuity (RD)—should guide any effort to quantify the economic impact of Florida's HSHT program, which marries a strong CTE component with intensive transition supports.

Appendix: Could Florida Data Support Analysis that Controls for Sample Selection Bias?

The Florida College Access Network (FCAN) in 2025 published a report describing the sorts of data currently tracked by the Florida Department of Education, with the objective of "explor[ing] opportunities for Florida to move to the next phase of State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) implementation and how to best ensure cross-agency data insights translate into actionable policies and practices in support of state education and workforce goals."67 The FCAN report

acknowledges that, despite Florida's relatively complete and mature SLDS, access for external analysts is constrained in ways that limit the system's potential value.

The report explains that external researchers seeking to analyze or evaluate data in the SLDS must submit requests through the Florida Department of Education's Bureau of PK-20 Education Data Reporting and Accessibility (PERA), and that the department explicitly "prioritizes internal data usage, education accountability, and public reporting," stating that research outside the department is supported only "as resources are available" and when there is "department interest in the research topic."[1] There are multiple steps in the application process, including identification of a program sponsor within FDOE, and the report notes that research requests "often take several months," with no public-facing information on the status of filed requests.

FCAN makes clear that Florida's SLDS and Education Data Warehouse (EDW) already contain the kinds of integrated, student-level data that would support analyses similar to Mazzotti et al. (2021) on secondary transition predictors and post-school outcomes. Florida's SLDS aggregates data from PK–12 schools, community colleges, state universities, adult education, and workforce education, and links them to employment, earnings, incarceration, and social service records via the Florida Education & Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP), with individual records connected primarily through the Florida Education Identifier (FLEID). This integrated PK–20+W infrastructure, coupled with unique identifiers and detailed information on enrollment, course taking, assessment, credentialing, and subsequent labor-market outcomes, is precisely the sort of data environment that underpins national predictor studies like Test et al. (2009) and the updated synthesis by Mazzotti et al. (2021), which rely on longitudinal, individual-level data and robust covariate sets to model relationships between in-school experiences (e.g., paid work, CTE participation, inclusion, self-determination) and postsecondary education and employment.

In principle, if the EDW and FDOE were more forthcoming—by streamlining and regularizing access for qualified researchers, articulating a clear cross-agency research agenda, and investing in an outward-facing research liaison function as the FCAN report recommends—it should be entirely feasible to conduct high-quality predictor analyses using Florida's data, and potentially to do so with greater statistical power and policy relevance given the scale and richness of the state's longitudinal records.

Document Endnotes

[1] A previous study conducted by an FSU graduate student consulting team for The Able Trust calculated the likely economic impact of increasing the labor force participation and employment of disabled Floridians. Under the assumptions used in that study, adding 304,813 people with disabilities to the labor force over a decade would yield some $112 bn in overall economic impact. See, The Benefits of Increasing the Labor Force Participation Rate for People with Disabilities, at https://www.abletrust.org/research-data-employment/

[2] The Able Trust, High School High Tech Youth Program https://www.abletrust.org/high-school-high-tech/

[3] Inclusive coursework is defined as coursework taken with the general population of the school. This of course may reflect the ability of the disabled student.

[4] National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), *Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition: What We Know and What We Still Need to Know* (Charlotte, NC: NTACT, 2016); David W. Test et al., "Evidence-Based Secondary Transition Predictors for Improving Postschool Outcomes for Students with Disabilities," *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* 32, no. 3 (2009): 160–81.

[5] The Able Trust, *Annual Report 2018–2019*; The Able Trust, "Crossing the Stage: The Impact of High School High Tech on Florida Students with Disabilities," news release, August 6, 2025.

[6] U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, High School/High Tech Program Guide: A Comprehensive Transition Program Promoting Careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math for Youth with Disabilities (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2007).

[7] https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/HSHT-MOU-w-signatures-2024.pdf Also, Florida Department of Education, Office of Inspector General, High School/High Tech Program, Monitoring Report M-1213-010 (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education, 2015); U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, "Guideposts for Success," https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/individuals/youth/guide.

[8] U.S. Department of Labor, "Guideposts for Success"; National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Guideposts for Success 2.0: A Framework for Successful Youth Transition to Adulthood (Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, 2018).

[9] "HIGH SCHOOL/HIGH TECH PROGRAM GUIDE A Comprehensive Transition Program Promoting Careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math for Youth with Disabilities," NCWD/Youth, 2007. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-L41-PURL-LPS113014/pdf/GOVPUB-L41-PURL-LPS113014.pdf. Also, "Transition Programs & Services: High School/High Tech & Vocational Rehabilitation," https://www.ed.gov/media/document/im-07-08pdf-103596.pdf

[10] Test et al., "Evidence-Based Secondary Transition Predictors."

[11] Valerie L. Mazzotti et al., "Secondary Transition Predictors of Postschool Success: An Update to the Research Base," Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals 44, no. 1 (2021): 47–64.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14]National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Guideposts for Success 2.0. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED598433.pdf

[15] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. “People with Health Conditions or Difficulties that Limit Work — July 2024.” Economic News Release, USDL-25-1485, September 30, 2025. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/dissup_09302025.htm

[16] U.S. Census Bureau, “Disability Characteristics,” American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1810, 2020–2024 (ACSST5Y2024).

[17] Figures from the UF Bureau for Business and Economic Research (BEBR) are slightly lower.[17]

[18] Woods & Poole Economics, 2025 CEDDS.

[19] Connor, D., Cavendish, W., Hallaran, A. & Olander, L., (2020) ""I'm Bright Enough to Do It, Even Though Sometimes I Feel I Can't Do It": Perspectives of High School Students with Learning Disabilities About Existing Supports to Achieve Graduation”, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 40(2). doi: https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v40i2.6665

[20] The Able Trust FY 2024-2025 Milestones. https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FY2024-25-Year-End-Impact-Report.pdf

[21] See “High School High Tech Demographics,” https://www.abletrust.org/hsht-facts/

[22] “The Able Trust is looking to expand its High School High Tech vocational program to thousands more students,” https://news.wfsu.org/state-news/2024-09-08/the-able-trust-is-looking-to-expand-its-high-school-high-tech-vocational-program-to-thousands-more-students

[23] https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/HSHT-Procedure-Manual-FY18.pdf

[24] The Able Trust, Annual Report 2018–2019; Florida Department of Education, Monitoring Report M-1213-010.

[25] Florida Department of Education, Monitoring Report M-1213-010.

[26] The Able Trust, Annual Report 2018–2019. https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/HSHT-infograph-FINAL.pdf

[27] Ibid.

[28] The Able Trust, Financial Statements and Independent Auditor’s Report, Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2020 (Tallahassee, FL: The Able Trust, 2020).

[29] The Able Trust, “Helios Education Foundation Grant Expands High School High Tech and Improves Postsecondary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Florida,” news release, June 9, 2025.

[30] https://floridacollegeaccess.org/news/sail-to-6-an-update-on-degree-attainment-in-florida/

[31] https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/credentials-of-value

[32] “Making Good on the Promise: Improving Equity and Access to Quality CTE Programs for Students with Disabilities,” Advance CTE & National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020 https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AdvanceCTE_Making_Good_on_Promise_Students_Disabilities_07212020.pdf

[33] See e.g., https://www.abletrust.org/the-able-trust-launches-futures-in-focus/ , and https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/2022-23-HSHT-Overview-and-MapFINAL-Feb2023.pdf

[34] The Able Trust, Annual Report 2018–2019; Florida Department of Education, Monitoring Report M-1213-010.

[35] The Able Trust, *Annual Report 2018–2019.*

[36] The Able Trust, Financial Statements and Independent Auditor’s Report, FY Ended June 30, 2020; The Able Trust, “2023 Project Venture Final Presentations,” August 23, 2023.

[37] Florida Department of Education, Monitoring Report M-1213-010; AdventHealth, “The Able Trust Empowering Students with Disabilities with Help from AdventHealth,” news release, Marc

https://www.abletrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/HSHT-Procedure-Manual-FY18.pdf h 10, 2025.

[38] Glennie, Elizabeth, Erich Lauff, and Randolph Ottem, "Rollout of the Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act. Undated. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c6398467a1fbd31149c1ce7/t/5dd47796f0a28a2d3ba80edd/1574205340410/Issue_Brief_Rollout_of_the_CAPE_Act.pdf

[39] Ibid.

[40] The Able Trust, "High School High Tech Memorandum of Agreement, 2024 Program Year," April 22, 2024.

[41] U.S. Department of Labor, HS/HT Program Guide; U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor, "High School/High Tech and Vocational Rehabilitation: A Collaborative Partnership for Transition Services," Information Memorandum IM-07-08, July 22, 2007.

[42]National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition (2016).

[43] Theobald, Roddy J., Dan Goldhaber, Trevor M. Gratz, and Kristian L. Holden. 2019. "Career and Technical Education, Inclusion, and Postsecondary Outcomes for Students With Learning Disabilities." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 52 (4): 287–299.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Brunner, Eric, Shaun M. Dougherty, and Stephen L. Ross. "Can Technical Education in High School Smooth Postsecondary Transitions for Students with Disabilities?" NBER Working Paper 32867. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2024. Revised March 2025. https://www.nber.org/papers/w32867.

[46] Fuzzy regression discontinuity design focused on applicants near the threshold and modeling the discontinuity in both admission probability and outcomes. For each CTE high school and application year, Connecticut calculates an application score for 8th-grade applicants based on middle-school grades, standardized test scores, attendance, and, in later years, an interest survey component. Importantly, the score does not include disability information; whether a student has an IEP or their disability type is omitted from the scoring. Students are ranked by this score, and each school sets a cutoff score (admissions threshold) above which applicants are offered admission, subject to capacity. The authors compare students falling immediately above and below the cutoff.

[47] Glennie, Elizabeth, et al., "The Influence of Earning Industry Certifications on High School Graduation: Evidence from Florida," Educational Policy, v39, No6, November 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048241292625.

[48] Ibid. However, presence of disability, as indicated by the primary EDW disability indicator variable, meant that the difference between the control and treatment groups made the groups too different in characteristics (see, p135 of the RTI report). Students with disabilities had a substantially lower estimated propensity to participate in CTE than did non-disabled students. Presumably, students with disabilities are among those who would benefit most from engagement, concrete goals, and labor market signaling value of CTE programing. In order to obtain wage increment change estimates useful for the purposes of the current study would have required looking only at students with disabilities in order to have more homogeneous groups across which to accurately estimate the magnitude of HSHT vs. non-HSHT effects.

[49] Guarine, Jonathan. "CTE Concentration and Students with Disabilities." *What Works in Workforce?* Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division, 2024. Accessed February 27, 2026. https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/the-lead-feed/cte-concentration-students-disabilities.

[50] After having used PSM methods to construct a control group and a matched treatment group, these estimated differences between the groups are more likely to be due to the different CTE experiences.

[51] Gaurine, op cit. notes “The comparison group is “matched” to the cohort of CTE concentrators on several different individual-level attributes, consisting of age, gender, race/ethnicity, school district, weighted grade point average (GPA), disability type, academic giftedness, English learning proficiency, prior employment, and prior wage earnings.”

[52] The NC figure is best thought of as an adjusted treatment effect rather than a simple raw difference. The NC data elements used for the estimation are similar to those contained in Florida’s longitudinal data housed in its Education Data Warehouse and the FETPIP databases.

[53] Taken from Crouse, Joseph T. “Worklife Expectancies for Individuals with Disability: A Comparison between the United States and Canada.” *The Rehabilitation Professional* 23, no. 2 (2015): 93–100.

[54] While this may change over time as a result of the Futures in Focus program being implemented, an unchanged grade level distribution seems the most reasonable assumption in the near term.

[55] Zhu, Jinfeng, et al. “Association Between Employment Status and Quality of Life for Adults With Disabilities in the United States.” Disability and Health Journal 15, no. 4 (2022)

[56] Florida has less than the average density of employment in manufacturing due to differences in historical industry structure. To the extent that more CTE skills enable workers to be better prepared for work in higher wage sectors than in the traditional retail and hospitality sectors. This has negative average wage impacts due to large tourism and retiree -driven sectors, see J Dewey and D Denslow, “Baby Boom Retirees and Florida’s Job Structure,” Business and Economics Journal, 2012, who write “Absent urgent and aggressive policy intervention, Florida’s workers that retire over the next 20 years are likely to be replaced by less educated and less skilled workers less suited to the knowledge economy, and the gap between Florida’s average job skill and the national average is likely to widen substantially.” https://www.bebr.ufl.edu/sites/default/files/Research%20Reports/baby_boom_retirees_2012_florida_regional_economic_symposium.pdf

[57] U.S. Department of Labor, HS/HT Program Guide; Test et al., “Evidence-Based Secondary Transition Predictors”; National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Guideposts for Success 2.0.

[58] National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Guideposts for Success 2.0; Mazzotti et al., “Secondary Transition Predictors”; The Able Trust, “Helios Education Foundation Grant…”

[59] The Able Trust, Annual Report 2018–2019; The Able Trust, Financial Statements and Independent Auditor’s Report, FY 2020; The Able Trust, “Helios Education Foundation Grant…”

[60] Florida Department of Education, Monitoring Report M-1213-010; WFSU Public Media, “The Able Trust Is Looking to Expand Its High School High Tech Vocational Program to Thousands More Students,” WFSU News, September 8, 2024; AdventHealth, “The Able Trust Empowering Students with Disabilities…”; Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, “AT&T Grant Helps Miami Lighthouse Youth Prepare for Employment after High School,” news release.

[61] Florida Department of Education, Monitoring Report M-1213-010; National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition; Mazzotti et al., “Secondary Transition Predictors.”

[62] For example, take an HSHT student with a specific disability, modest 9th-grade grades, good attendance, and low-income status. Propensity score matching would pair them with a non-HSHT student who has the same characteristics and similar predicted probability of joining HSHT but who didn’t actually participate. If HSHT students in these matched pairs still graduate more often and

earn more over time, that difference is much more plausibly capturing the added value of HSHT, rather than just differences in who signed up.

[63] See, e.g., Institute of Education Sciences, Improving Post-High School Outcomes for Transition-Age Students with Disabilities (NCEE 2013–4012).

[64] See examples summarized in NTACT, Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition and in Mazzotti et al., “Secondary Transition Predictors.”

[65] National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition; Mazzotti et al., “Secondary Transition Predictors.”

[66] Mazzotti et al., “Secondary Transition Predictors”; National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition.

[67] Florida College Access Network, *Insights into Action: The Next Phase of Florida’s Statewide Longitudinal Data System* (Tampa, FL: FCAN, 2025). https://floridacollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FCAN-SLDS-Report.pdf