

# What do Parent Center Transition Specialists Need to Know?

by Judy Moses, M.S., and Deborah Leuchovius, M.A.

## Introduction

The importance of Secondary Transition in special education has evolved dramatically over the last 10 years along with increased expectations of families of youth with disabilities for appropriate services. These expectations are reinforced by legislation requiring transition planning, services and coordination in the Rehabilitation Act (93-112), the Workforce Investment Act (P.L. 105-220) and the Carl Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act (P.L. 10 1-392) as well as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 108-446). Families therefore reasonably expect serious and measurable outcomes from schools and service providers that may include: competitive employment upon high school graduation, postsecondary education opportunities, independent living, active community participation, and—when needed—assistance from appropriate public programs (e.g., healthcare, Social Security benefits and Plan to Achieve Self-Support [PASS] plans, housing vouchers, transportation).

To transform these high expectations into reality, and help youth with disabilities achieve successful transition outcomes, disability practitioners, including parent center staff, must have a knowledge base that includes disability rights, service systems, and research-based transition practice. In addition, parent center professionals must have a set of skills and abilities that

enable them to help youth with disabilities and their families plan and actively prepare for the future.

This information is intended to help parent centers as they increase their expertise to serve the families of transition-age youth with disabilities, demonstrate the need for staff with transition-focused expertise to funding agencies, consider potential employment candidates, and identify staff development needs.

The knowledge areas, skills, and abilities presented here reflect both research by TATRA Project staff into proficiencies identified for similar professionals and the combined experience of project staff who implemented the transition-focused parent information and training projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) from 2007-2012.<sup>1</sup> It is a work in progress and the authors welcome your comments and suggestions.

## Parent Centers and the Need for Transition Specialists

Parent centers authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services provide training and assistance to the families of the nation's 6.7 million children with

<sup>1</sup> Vicki Benson, Reva Guimont and Bobbie Coulbourne from *Exceptional Parents Unlimited*, Fresno, CA; Tara Bremer from *Family Network On Disabilities of Florida*; Michelle Phillips from *Family Resource Center on Disability*, Chicago, IL; Charlotte Price from *Wisconsin FAC-ETS*, Sally Hamburg and Wilner Cusic from *IN\*SOURCE*, South Bend, Indiana; Anthony Carmichael from *Parents Sharing Parent Support*, Michigan; Janice La Chance from *Maine Parent Federation*; Mary Kay Savage and Debbie Stewart from *Missouri Parents Act (MPACT)*.

disabilities. Every state has at least one parent center, and those with larger populations have more.

These parent centers are funded to serve families of children of all ages (birth to 26) and with all disabilities (physical, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional). They provide a variety of services to families including one-to-one support and assistance, workshops, publications, and Websites to help parents help their children and youth with disabilities “*meet developmental and functional goals, and challenging academic achievement goals that have been established for all children*”, and be “*prepared to lead productive independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible.*” (IDEA, Title I, Part D, Sec. 602(3))

Parent centers are charged with helping parents to communicate effectively and work collaboratively with education personnel. They help parents to obtain appropriate information about the range, type, and quality of options, programs, services, technologies, practices and interventions and resources available to assist children with disabilities and their families in school and at home.

The TATRA 2009 Survey of Federally Funded Parent Centers found 98.8% of parent centers responding to the survey rated the need for additional staff specializing in transition and vocational rehabilitation as “very important” or “important” in order to meet the needs of families. Parent center professionals have repeatedly indicated that they need to expand their skills in a variety of areas that will benefit families of transition age youth. These areas include increasing their knowledge of career awareness and vocational exploration, transition planning and resources, advocacy skills for both families and youth, and increasing their ability to engage in interagency collaboration.

Similar needs have been reported in a study conducted to identify and validate competencies for transition specialists in related fields. The highest-rated competencies chosen by special education, vocational special education and vocational rehabilitation professionals were “*knowledge of agencies and systems change.*” “*Utilizing effective interpersonal communication skills, problem-solving, collaboration, facilitation, and coordination*” were among the next highest rated competencies (DeFur & Taymans, 1995). Research by Morningstar & Kleinhammer-Tramill (2005) has also shown that whereas knowledge of transition basics is important, knowing “how to implement” successful

transitions for youth with disabilities is critical.

“*The role of secondary special educators has shifted from involving traditional, school-based service provision to requiring coordination among all stakeholders during the transition process*” (Morningstar & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2005).

The active collaboration of a wide range of service providers has always been key to a successful transition team. As difficult as this may be to establish and coordinate, researchers of transition outcomes have identified “interagency cooperation” and “interdisciplinary skills” as among the most important competencies for professionals in the field of transition (DeFur & Taymans, 1995). Along with interdisciplinary skills—communication, collaboration, consultation—the following general, core competencies are important when considering the knowledge, skills and abilities needed by parent center transition specialists.

It is important to remember, however, that transition planning is team focused. No one person should be expected to have expertise in all the following areas. Building a professional network is equally important, so that parent center transition staff are able to make appropriate referrals to families and youth in all of these areas.

## **History of Transition and Disability Legislation**

Parent center professionals are called upon to collaborate with or provide consultation services to families, the schools and State and Federal staff (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Department of Human Services, Social Security). They may be called upon to help facilitate the student’s transition from school to work, post secondary education, independent living and benefit programs. This often includes planning for appropriate services through the development of the special education Individualized Education Program (IEP) and VR’s Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), Medicaid and healthcare programs, County Services and Social Security PASS plans.

A thorough understanding of transition-related legislation in the fields of special and vocational education, rehabilitation, labor and civil rights is therefore critical. This includes knowledge of the historic foundation, current regulations, amendments, and best practices. It is important to understand the differences that might exist between Federal and State transition law, how regulations

are being implemented in local school districts, and whether a student's particular district is in compliance.

Collaboration, consultation, implementation, and support skills are required in areas such as:

- Transition requirements of IDEA during high school and the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) that provides protection for students with disabilities in postsecondary, employment and other settings after graduation;
- Development of the IEP and IPE and knowledge of due process procedures, parents' rights, informed choice, self-determination, universal access and reasonable accommodations, students' rights at the Age of Majority;
- Knowledge of disability related legislation such as the Rehabilitation, Americans with Disabilities, Work Force Investment, Higher Education Opportunity, Fair Housing, Developmental Disabilities, Social Security, Carl Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology, and Telecommunication Acts;
- Eligibility for and advantages of Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, Health Care Reform, waivers and other County, State and Federal programs;
- Roles of federal, state and local legislation for providing transition services;
- History of national transition models, initiatives and outcomes;
- Strategies for increasing families' knowledge and skills about transition-related issues and disability related topics, including transition-focused educational program development.

## **Adult Services and Benefits**

---

While in high school, the school district determines if a student is eligible for special education services and is then responsible to provide those services. The school determines eligibility as defined by one law—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA's transition regulations requires schools to help students with disabilities prepare for further education and develop job goals and independent living plans (if needed) before they leave high school.

After high school graduation, or when the student has aged out of the special education system, no one piece of legislation defines federal services to youth with

disabilities. Services similar to those authorized through IDEA may not be available, may have waiting lists, and will generally require eligibility determination.

Youth and their families may experience a confusing number of providers with different eligibility requirements linked to a variety of state and federal legislation and funding streams. This lack of a centralized system makes understanding and accessing adult services difficult.

Collaboration, consultation, implementation and support skills are required in areas such as:

- Eligibility, the application process, and services provided by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation;
- Eligibility and application processes for Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, work incentives, health and other benefits—especially in relationship to work;
- Eligibility and application processes for community disability and non-disability services;
- Community-based programs, school-to-work programs and various funding streams;
- Benefit planning, especially in regards to transitioning from public assistance to self-sufficiency.

## **Youth and Parent Engagement and Training**

---

It has been demonstrated by research that youth, as well as their families and communities, benefit from coordinated activities focused on preparing youth for adult living. The importance of helping youth develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills has also emerged as a key predictor of post-school success for youth with disabilities. In addition to helping parents plan for the future and connect their youth to needed transition services, parent centers are uniquely positioned to provide families with training on what they can do to help youth develop these skills. The importance of this function cannot be over stated as parents are the only consistent resource for youth with disabilities. They may, however, need to effectively support their youth's transition to adulthood.

Knowledge of issues and trends affecting youth with disabilities is important (e.g. low expectations, attitudinal or environmental barriers, need for social integration). It is also important for parent center transition staff to have ongoing training on both traditional and new topics, for

example, privacy and confidentiality rights in the age of social media and electronic communication. Texting is often a preferred form of communication; the Internet has become a major portal to information, employment, education, housing, transportation, and recreational opportunities; and the online community is where youth spend a significant amount of social time.

Collaboration, consultation, implementation, and support skills are required in areas such as:

- Development of youth and family advocacy skills;
- Facilitation of person-centered planning;
- Identification and use of Assistive Technology;
- Basic Internet and social networking skills and consumer online safety education;
- Involvement of youth in their own planning process—setting realistic goals and action steps, becoming involved in their own IEP and making informed choices;
- Parent and youth training on transition-related education and services, post-school options, and disability awareness and culture;
- Connecting families to support networks and services needed by youth;
- Personal assistance services, including attendants, readers, interpreters, or other such services.

## **Self-determination and Self Advocacy**

---

Research has shown a link between post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities and self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Self-determination skills include self-knowledge, goal setting, decision-making, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. The process of becoming a self-determined individual is one of gaining control over one's life. This process becomes a life-skill that will serve students for all of their lives. Youth who leave high school with self-determination skills have a greater chance of achieving positive post-school outcomes.

Youth with self-determination and advocacy skills will be able to exert greater control in the selection and use of adult services and supports to reach their post-secondary education and employment goals. As youth move from a system of entitlement to one based on eligibility, they will need to know what their rights are and how to ask for accommodations. Colleges

report that a large percentage of youth with disabilities who need accommodations cannot effectively state what their disability is, how it impacts their ability to learn, and what accommodations they need to be successful. If students cannot self-disclose and ask for accommodations at post-secondary institutions or in the workplace, they will not receive them.

Collaboration, consultation, implementation, and support skills are required in areas such as:

- Independent and community living options including accommodations and supports;
- Waivered Services that help keep an individual either in their family home or provide them with services in the least restrictive environment within the community;
- Age of majority and transfer of rights requirements beginning at least one year before a student reaches the age of majority under State law consistent with Part B §300.520 (IDEA 2004 regulations);
- Guardianship and conservatorship options;
- Assistive technology and accommodations strategies for the workplace or post-secondary education;
- Health planning such as medication management, scheduling clinic appointments, and transitioning from pediatric care to adult medical care;
- Community orientation and mobility/travel training, such as accessible transportation, bus routes to and from housing, health clinics, etc.;
- Local programming of Centers for Independent Living (CILs), nonprofit community-based nonresidential programs that are operated by and for people with disabilities.

## **Career Development and Post Secondary Education**

---

According to families the preparation for post high school employment and post-secondary education is extremely important for youth with disabilities. The expectation is high among families, professionals and the community for young adults, with or without disabilities, to work. Career development and writing career plans require purposefully thinking about and writing down ideas about employment goals and preferences. Information to be included on a career plan is discussed

and decided by a youth with support and input from her or his family. It should provide information about a youth's employment skills, strengths, preferences, goals, and accommodation and support needs.

Career exploration expands on the youth's interests, strengths, and abilities. Formal programs such as apprenticeships, job shadowing, community- or service-learning projects, and classes open to non-degree program adults at a community college, university, or technical school are possible options. Informal career exploration experiences may include activities such as summer camps, visiting colleges, touring area businesses, or volunteering to help at a nonprofit organization. Internet or library searches will provide information about schools, entry requirements, cost, length, and financial support. These first exploratory steps can be expanded upon throughout the young adult's career path. Collaboration with a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor for guidance, vocational assessment, job training and other potential resources and services can be a valuable part of this process for youth who qualify for these services.

Collaboration, consultation, implementation and support skills are required in areas such as:

- Interpretation of a variety of formal and informal career, transition, and vocational assessments that identify an individual's skills, interests, and preferences;
- Facilitation of job readiness skills and assessment of employability strengths and barriers;
- Instruction on job seeking and retention skills including use of technology and the Internet;
- Workplace and labor market trends;
- Methods and principles of work-based experiences;
- Work Force Center adult and youth programs;
- Post-secondary education, training options and funding;
- Eligibility for VR services and the supports available through the state VR agency for career exploration, training and post-secondary education;
- Development of natural support systems.

## **Community Connection and Networking**

---

Parent center staff are expected to have culturally appropriate implementation skills, demonstrate

positive regard for the capacity and service constraints of community agencies, and be proficient at communicating with and coordinating a variety of stakeholders.

Successful transition outcomes require youth, family members and a variety of service professionals to operate as a team with a united focus on the youth's preferences, strengths, and quality of life needs. However, team members may have different perspectives, differing levels of authority, or concerns about financial resources that make consensus difficult to achieve. There are many opportunities for the transition plan, even with the best intentions of all team members, to breakdown at the individual, team, or systemic level.

Implementation of a youth's transition plan requires more than extensive knowledge of transition legislation or evidence-based practices. It requires high-level coordination, consulting, and communication skills, and a clear understanding of the perspectives, beliefs, and experiences of other team members that influence motivation, decisions, and outcomes.

Families can be encouraged and supported to use their personal networks—both formal and informal—to increase and improve the kinds of opportunities available to their son or daughter. A personal network, made up of all the people that a family knows, is an important resource both for the transition plan and for families to work with informally outside the school system. Parents can share what type of work or volunteer experiences, independent living expectations, transportation needs, and recreational activities their youth is interested in and brainstorm about possible opportunities that might be a good match. Contacts in a network open up a wide range of possibilities especially when referral to others is solicited. Developing a youth's ability to follow-up on these network resources contributes to the development of life-long independent living skills.

Collaboration, consultation, implementation and support skills are required in areas such as:

- Identification of community resources—i.e., people, places, and funding;
- Building relationships and networks with community agencies and other potential partners—i.e., educators, administrators, employers, and agency representatives;
- Connection of youth to community institutions,

- resources, and supportive adults, including mentors and role models;
- Team building, conflict management, and resolution strategies;
- Ability to build relationships, trust, and rewarding experiences with culturally diverse participants;
- Knowledge of universal access and design, reasonable accommodation, auxiliary aids, and services.

## Summary

---

IDEA transition requirements, along with the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Work Force Investment Act, Higher Education Act, and Fair Housing Act have the broad intent of enabling youth with disabilities to live independently; enjoy self-determination; contribute to society; pursue meaningful

competencies listed by special education, vocational special education and vocational rehabilitation professionals as a foundation for successful transition outcomes (DeFur & Taymans, 1995).

careers; and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society. Collectively, these federal laws establish policies, expectations and standards for programs and services for youth and adults with disabilities.

As these laws demonstrate, Congress clearly has intended to create and fund federal programs and tools that help individuals with disabilities achieve successful quality of life outcomes (such as post-secondary education, competitive employment, community participation, and independent living). Implementation of this vision requires coordinated services, and the active collaboration of youth, family and multiple service agencies.

Knowledge of “agencies and systems change” is a complex skill but one of the most important

## Resources

---

- DCDT Research Committee and the Transition-Related Competencies Project (2000). *Transition Specialist Competencies: Fact Sheet*. Funded through the Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education (Grant #H029K40161). Retrieved 3/1/2013 from [http://www.dcdt.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/DCDT\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_Competencies\\_3.pdf](http://www.dcdt.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/DCDT_Fact_Sheet_Competencies_3.pdf)
- DeFur, S.H., & Taymans, J.M. (1995). “Competencies needed for transition specialists in vocational rehabilitation, vocational education, and special education.” *Exceptional Children*, 62, 38-51. Retrieved 3/1/2013 from <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Exceptional-Children/17435395.html>
- Leuchovius, D., & Goldberg, P.F. (2011). *The 2009-2010 TATRA Survey of Federally Funded Parent Centers*. Minneapolis, MN: PACER Center: Retrieved 3/1/13 from <http://www.pacer.org/tatra/pdf/TATRA-2009-survey.pdf>
- Morningstar, M. E., & Clark, G. M. (2003). “The status of personnel preparation for transition education and services: What is the critical content? How can it be offered?” *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 26(2), 227–237. Retrieved 3/1/2013 from <http://cde.sagepub.com/content/26/2/227.abstract>
- Morningstar, M.E., & Kleinhammer-Tramill, J. (2005). “Professional Development for Transition Personnel: Current Issues and Strategies for Success.” National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (Cooperative Agreement No. H326J000005). *Information Brief*. Vol. 4. Retrieved 3/1/2013 at <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=2440>

*This publication is a product of PACER Center’s Technical Assistance on Transition and the Rehabilitation Act (TATRA) Project. It is funded in part by PR/Award #H2356070004 from the U.S. Department of Education. TATRA was funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) between 1994 and 2013. Views in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its funders.*