

Creating a Partnership to Make the Transition from School to Work Succeed.
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Life transitions are always challenging, even joyful events such as a wedding or a birth propel us out of our comfort zone to accommodate dramatic changes in our life. School transitions are uniquely stressful for students with disabilities and their families as everyone has to revisit the need to individualize educational supports with every change of grade or move from elementary to middle school and finally to high school.

However the transition from secondary school to the world of work is perhaps the most critical for a student with substantial disabilities and his/her family. First the family is faced with the brutal fact that while the supports that were delivered in public schools are mandated by federal law there is no mandate for adult services once an individual exits high school. Second, the adult provider system can present a dizzying array of choices that impact the entire family, not just the young adult with substantial disabilities. Couple this with the fact that the parents or guardians are 18 to 20 years older than when their child entered public school. Now parents and guardians may be dealing with additional family stressors such as caring for other children, caring for older grand parents or dealing with family illness and job stress, and the situation is ripe for extreme stress.

Fortunately, support to make the transition from school to work more comfortable is available. Since the passage of the IDEA, the federal legislation that mandated transition planning by all secondary special education programs, the schools have been evolving to promote better transition outcomes for students with substantial disabilities. Individual secondary schools are working to expand their capability to provide more community based work explorations and actual job trails, internships and first job experiences for students with substantial disabilities. In many communities the secondary transition programs are well developed, in many others these programs are still in need of much improvement in both the quality and quantity of the work experiences they offer. This white paper will focus on how to improve the relationship between the secondary school program and the adult provider community to enable a smoother transition for the young adult with substantial disabilities.

Specifically how can we develop stronger, more effective partnerships among young people with substantial disabilities, their family members, the secondary schools and the adult provider community? The heart of a successful partnership is teamwork. A functional team relies on the talents and skills of every member of the team to play the role needed to achieve the desired goal. In this case, every member of the partnership that forms around the young adult with disabilities has a vital role to play to enable that young person to take his/her role in the community. The recognition that every voice is important to the process is a critical first step.

Second, the young adult with disabilities should be the center of the decision- making and everyone needs to acknowledge that this young person is in fact, an adult and is worthy of

respect and ownership of his/her own life going forward. This may be a difficult concept to grasp and sustain when the young adult has severe or multiple disabilities, especially if there are cognitive limitations present. However, regardless of the level of cognitive functioning present, embracing the adult status of the young person with disabilities will support decisions that are age appropriate, forward thinking, and embrace the highest expectations for that young person's future. All players in the transition partnership must start with the understanding that every member of the team has a role to play in assisting the individual who has just achieved adulthood to shape a life that meets his/her desires and highest expectations. From there each member brings unique insights to the process beginning with the young adult.

Young Adult in Transition

- This is your life, not Mom's life or your Father's life. You own your decisions. You own your successes and you own your failures or disappointments.
- If you want others to respect your rights as an adult you also need to embrace your responsibilities as an adult. Do the chores assigned to you at home and perform your work duties as proscribed by your employer and people will treat you with the respect you deserve.
- The transition partnership includes many people who each have something to offer you to support you in making a successful transition to community life. You do not have to like every member of the team but you should respect them and respect that even people that you do not feel close to may have something important to give you to help you on your journey forward.
- Once you begin a job and start earning a paycheck it is time to sit down with your family and determine a budget. All adults have bills to pay and no doubt your family will benefit by your offer to pay a portion of some of your living expenses to help out your family. Consider setting up a simple budget that divides your earnings into an account for paying bills, an account to save for future needs and desired purchases and a portion to spend each week on yourself. This is a learning experience that will better prepare you for living on your own or in supported residential services in the future.
- You do not have to decide everything at once and you can and should use this time to 'explore' your options as a young adult. Very few people continue working at the very first job. More often than not, young adults will try more than one or two jobs to find out what they really like to do and what type of company they enjoy working for.
- Life is really a journey. This transition from school to your first, or second jobs is just the beginning. There will be many transitions you will experience in life. Some

changes you will look forward to, others will not be a pleasant or even may be difficult.

- While you own your life, life in the community is about including others and accepting help from others in the community. That is true for everyone (people with and without disabilities)! As you take your place in the community you will have opportunities to help others to make community life more rewarding as well.

Parents/Guardians of the Young Adult

- You have the most experience and history with your adult child with disabilities. The insights you have gained from a lifetime of parenting this young adult are invaluable to the partnership.
- Embrace the fact that your emotional attachment to your son or daughter makes you a passionate advocate. At times your passion will help the other partners to view your son/daughter, as a whole person who has emotional as well as physical and objective needs. Sometimes that passion can blind you to your son/daughters less desirable habits or behaviors and can make you to be less objective. At these times it will be important to be open to guidance from the other members of the transition team.
- Focus on your son/daughter as a newly arrived young adult, not as the child he/she once was. Now is the time to give your son/daughter more responsibility to manage and their own lives. Start with the same chores you would expect from other adult children who do not have disabilities. Even individuals with moderate cognitive disabilities can be taught to do their own laundry, clean their rooms, and take on other household responsibilities. Even young people with severe cognitive disabilities can be supervised to partially complete these tasks under your supervision or that of other family members.
- Once your son or daughter begins a job it is time to learn about handling money in a responsible manner. All adults have bills to pay and we don't do our adult children any favors by not teaching them that with adulthood comes financial obligations. Even if your family does not need the money, consider setting up a simple budget that divides the new paycheck into an account for paying bills, an account to save for future needs and desired purchases, and a portion to spend each week on themselves. Then let your son or daughter take responsibility for paying their agree share of 'bills" to you each pay period. This lesson will serve you all well when it comes time for adult children to live on their own or in a supported residential situation.
- Identify the issues that will affect your entire family in the transition planning process and help the team keep these in mind as you navigate solutions. For

example, transporting your young adult to a job site may impact your work hours or care for other family members on certain days, a fact the adult provider agency needs to understand. On other days of the week or on weekends, some adjustment of the family schedule is reasonable and should be expected to accommodate the work schedule of your adult son or daughter.

- Accept the fact that the workforce and employers are not going to view your son/daughter as “special” and you should not want that. Part of joining the community as a full citizen is the expectation that your son or daughter will be expected to work certain hours and fulfill specific responsibilities required by his/her employer to full earn their paycheck. That includes accepting the consequences when your young adults behavior or performance falls short of an employers expectations.
- Recognize that the “ideal” job does not exist. Even the best job requires some compromises be made and even a bad job can provide a valuable learning experience. Waiting to find the ideal situation is not going to provide your son/daughter with a realistic expectation of what the world of work is all about.

Secondary School Personnel

- Secondary Schools have a unique opportunity and responsibility to transmit the core values of a community to the next generation. Teaching young adults how to be good community citizens is as important as teaching the subject areas.
- Secondary special education teachers bring an understanding about the learning styles of the students in their classrooms and often have insights on how to modify instructional strategies to help specific learners grasp a concept or master a task.
- Secondary education and the culture of secondary schools is all about transition and helping students make informed choices. The need to make many choices is also true for students without disabilities who must choose between entering the workforce directly and attending vocational, trade, community college or university post secondary programs after they leave high school.
- Students without disabilities spend their secondary years exploring their interests, leveraging their skills and finding answers to what they want to pursue after high school. Secondary school to work transition programs should provide real work experiences, such as internship and trial work experiences, to enable students with disabilities to try many different types of work environments.
- Ultimately secondary schools are the final stop in the journey from school to work so everything that the student has gained in their school years must be

packaged and ready for the student to use when they get their first job. Creating a portfolio of the secondary student's work experiences and internships informs better decision making in job and career choices after secondary school ends.

Adult Provider Community

- The adult provider community may include a variety of professionals and each one brings a unique perspective to the transition partnership. Vocational rehabilitation counselors, employment support professionals, care managers and others may all be part of the process of designing and executing the transition plan with the team.
- By carefully coordinating services and supports, each member of the adult service community can stretch even public limited dollars to do more than could be accomplished without coordination of effort.
- Adult providers of supported employment services have a unique understanding of the employers and businesses in the community that will help inform the young adult about the types of jobs available and the expectations that employers have of their work force.
- Adult providers will be interfacing with the young adult and his/her family unit over the course of their transition, sometimes for many years after the young adult has left secondary school. The adult provider community may assist with multiple job changes, may help the individual move from his/her parent's home to a residence of their own or supported residential living, and may also be present for many other life changes and transitions as the former secondary student ages through adulthood. Each life transition will bring new opportunities and new challenges to be faced.

Having the examined the unique insights that each member of the transition team brings to the process, what are the strategies that will facilitate a stronger, more effective partnership?

1. The first step is to willingly commit to open, honest and respectful communication. There will be times when members of the team will disagree but open communication will go a long way to resolving conflicts and reaching consensus.
2. Next, each team member must own their part in the execution of the transition plan and do their utmost to deliver on the commitments they have agreed to on the plan. Likewise, when a commitment falls short of the goal, the team member responsible needs to own the lapse in execution and be willing to re-commit to improvement going forward.

3. Everyone must agree on a timetable for accomplishing each task on the transition plan and a schedule to review and revise the time line when needed. Revisions on the timeline will happen, but agreement on having a time line is the key to accomplishing the plan.

4. Everyone should understand that the plan must be flexible. Making the commitment to revisit and revise the plan as needed and as events unfold is essential. The best-laid plan is just that, a plan. Life provides opportunities and presents challenges that force us to change our plans in light of new circumstances.

In conclusion, building functional working relationships across all the members of a transition team takes commitment and time. However, few things are as rewarding as helping a young adult to find his/her place in the community.