

Effective Transition Services for Students With Disabilities: Examining the
Roles of Building Principals and School Counselors

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Abstract

As educators prepare secondary students for post-graduate experiences, students with disabilities are often exposed to fewer opportunities that prepare them to be responsible and productive members of society. Building level administrators and school counselors are vital members in assuring that students with disabilities are included in as many post-secondary opportunities as their non-disabled peers. A collaborative effort between students, parents, teachers, counselors, and principals must occur in order to provide students with disabilities effective transition services that will allow them to become contributing members of the community.

Effective Transition Services for Students With Disabilities: Examining the Roles of Building Principals and School Counselors

Transition is a natural part of life that we all experience at some point in time. This may be experienced when we are transitioning from pre-school to kindergarten, middle school to high school, or from work to graduate school. Transition for students with disabilities is not always described as a smooth process. In fact many students with disabilities and their families experience difficulty when accessing necessary transition services (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002). Recent literature and research have not intertwined the elements of administration, school counselor, special education, and transition services for students with disabilities. This position paper will attempt to explore some of the educational obstacles and administrative barriers that prevent secondary students and families from receiving effective transition services. Also, the roles of building principals and school counselors are examined as necessary team members to provide effective transition planning, coordination of services, and access to services.

Current educational structures view special education as a separate entity from the general education curriculum and instruction (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). Historically, special education programs have been offered in isolated and segregated settings and received little or no administrative support (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2004). Even the special education departments were housed in separate locations from the general education staff. More recently, there has been a move toward site-based management that encourages the participation and collaboration of the building

principal, school counselor, special education administrator, and general and special educators (Weishaar & Borsa, 2001).

During the years of 1985 to 1993, the National Longitudinal Transition Survey (NLTS) was funded by Congress to assess the postsecondary outcomes and related transition services of special education students. In this study, a random sample of 8,000 special education students from various states, socioeconomic levels, school settings, and disability categories were surveyed (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). The following NLTS data give a brief description of the outcomes for postsecondary students with disabilities:

1. *High school dropout rates* range from 28 to 48%, compared to 25% for non-disabled students.
2. *23% access postsecondary education*, compared to 52% non-disabled students.
3. *16% of these students entering college* receive a degree, compared to 27% of their non-disabled peers.
4. There is a *57% employment rate* for students with disabilities after two years of graduation, compared to 73% for non-disabled students.
5. *Almost 30% of all persons with disabilities who work earn below poverty level wages.*

As described in the above data, secondary students with disabilities do not fare as well as their non-disabled peers in maintaining and sustaining postsecondary employment and education. In a study conducted by DeStafano and Wagner (1991), it was discovered that students with disabilities who graduate from high school experience poor adjustments in the areas of friendships, community access, ability to live independently from their parents, and accessing postsecondary environments. There are implications for all stakeholders, especially principals, school counselors, and

general and special educators when providing effective transition services for students with disabilities.

Research Synthesis

Rationale for Transition Planning and Promising Practices

The widespread concern over quality-of-life outcomes resulted in a legal mandate for transition planning and service provision in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. This legislation required that public schools develop a “statement of needed transition services” for students with individualized education programs (IEPs) age 16 or older, or younger if appropriate (IDEA Amendments of 1990, 20 U.S.C. §1401). The IDEA was amended in 1997 to include an additional “statement of transition needs” that was designed to support a student’s high school course of study (e.g., career and technical education or advanced academics) (IDEA Amendments of 1997, 20 U.S.C. § 1414). In the context of IDEA, the term “transition services” means a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that includes the following essential elements that: (a) consider a student’s needs, (b) are designed within an outcome-oriented process, (c) include a coordinated set of activities, and (d) promote movement from school to post school life (20 U.S.C. § 1401 [30]). Transition plans should identify roles and responsibilities of the school and agencies that will be assisting with transition services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 focuses on a results-oriented process that is designed to improve the academic and functional achievement of students with disabilities. According to Wagner, Cameto, and Newman, (2003), the basic requirement for transition planning is being met and at least 90 percent of secondary students are

receiving transition services. However, the resulting transition practices need to be examined to determine which have more promise for providing quality transition services.

Transition services for students with disabilities are based on the student's individual needs. This is a collaborative process that involves the active participation of parents, students, community organizations, agencies, institutions of higher education, and school professionals such as special and general education teachers, school counselors, and administrators (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000). These needs are determined by the participants in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process and outlined in the student's IEP. Based on the definition of transition services, a coordinated set of activities includes a series of steps.

According to the Training and Technical Assistance Center, School of Education, College of William and Mary, there are five steps involved in transition planning: (a) identify the student's desired post-secondary outcomes; (b) identify the student's present levels of educational performance; (c) design statements of transition service needs; (d) write the actual transition services plan; and (e) the IEP team constructs annual goals and objectives/benchmarks. Throughout this process the building administrator and school counselor play an important role in working with special educators to monitor the implementation of each student's transition plan. The counselor's training and expertise in career development and academic planning will definitely come into play during this time of need.

An additional practice with promise for supporting the transition process is family involvement and participation. Research supports a strong family involvement to ensure

the success of the transition process. Repetto and Correa (1996) asserted that the involvement of families throughout their child's life further promotes the positive impact of a seamless transition model. Aspects of this model include preparing families and students for self-determination and service coordination, locating service centers in the community, providing access to family and student support groups, and overseeing service delivery through community interagency cooperative councils.

Implications for Counselors

Secondary school counselors have a unique position when working with students who require transition planning. The services (i.e., career assessment, conflict mediation, identifying strengths and limitations, course planning, community resources, and college planning) that school counselors provide to general education students are just as beneficial to students with disabilities (McEachern, 2003). However, Clark (1996) identifies 11 types of assessment that counselors can use to support transition planning: achievement, adaptive behavior, aptitude, communication, functional capacity, learning styles, manual dexterity, occupational interest, personality/social skills, prevocational/employability, and transition/community adjustment. Numerous tests and assessment measures are available commercially for each of these assessment areas. In addition, given the cultural and linguistic diversity represented in the special education population, counselors also need to develop a level of cultural competence in order to respond appropriately to the needs of students and families. Clark recommends a transition assessment approach that is not only culture/language fair, but also culture/language enhanced.

Another significant implication for school counselors is administrative support and improved understanding of the professional role of the school counselor in serving students with disabilities. In a study conducted by Fitch, Newby, Ballestro, and Marshall (2001), perceptions of the counselor's role as seen by future school administrators in 43 states and Puerto Rico were categorized into two primary categories of least related to counseling tasks and most related to counseling tasks. The sample size for this study yielded responses from 86 future school administrators. The most frequent items labeled as tasks *least* relative to the school counselors role included: registration, testing, special education assistance, record keeping, and discipline. Responses for the *most* important counselor related tasks were: crisis response, creating a safe environment for students to talk, helping teachers respond to crisis, and assisting with transition services (Fitch et al.). This study illustrated that some school administrators have misconstrued the role of the school counselor in supporting students with disabilities. However, school counselors play an integral role in promoting the academic and transition success of all students including those who are served by special education programs.

Implications for Principals

Training for building administrators is often sporadic and lacking in continuity that often results in one or two day workshops on special education topic. Many principals report that they receive little or no training for supervising special educators. Using an informal phone survey, Stephens and Nieberdin (2003) were able to assess the special education knowledge of Ohio school principals, special education administrators, and teachers. The survey was constructed of twenty-six items across four categories:

instruction and programming, placement procedures, federal and state laws and regulations, and procedural safeguards. Results of the survey indicate that teachers and special education administrators felt strongly about the lack of training and preparation that school principals have when supervising special educators. Conversely, building principals felt that they had adequate training and did not need additional training in understanding the special education law. These preliminary findings only underscore the importance of a building administrator's support, especially when it concerns the implementation of transition services for students with disabilities.

McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) offered additional implications for school principals who want to foster a collaborative culture in order for students with disabilities to receive appropriate transition services. They suggested the following five things a principal needs to know about special education: (a) understand the legal entitlements of special education; (b) understand how to match effective instruction with the learning characteristics of students; (c) understand that special education is a program, not a place. (d) know how to meaningfully include students with disabilities in assessment; and (e) know how to create an inclusive environment in school settings. Even with all of these components in place, principals may continue to face challenges in providing effective transition services for students with disabilities.

Challenges

Johnson et al. (2002) found that students with disabilities often experience difficulty throughout their high school experience in the following categories: accessing the general education curriculum; clarification of graduation requirements; accessing postsecondary education, employment, and independent living opportunities; supporting

students and family participation; and improving collaboration between schools and agencies. Few school districts are preparing their administrators and professional staff to combat these obstacles for students with disabilities and their families. This can make for a long and enduring high school career and pose a threat for students and their families after graduation.

Additional challenges are presented for school administrators who either do not know or do not have the resources to provide adequate transition services. Stephens and Nieberding (2003) affirmed the major lack of opportunity for building principals to secure the knowledge and understanding for implementing and sustaining special education programs in their schools. The authors suggested the need to accommodate principals by providing them with stipends or scholarships, materials, child care, distance learning, and video conferencing as methods of professional development to compensate for their lack of knowledge and understanding of special education law, implementation of the law, and supervision of special education programs in their buildings.

Not only do building principals experience difficulty in providing transition services, school counselors are just as disadvantaged. Current research has noted the lack of preparation or limited preparation that many school counselors receive to assist students with the transition process (Bugaj, 2000; McEachern, 2003). Challenges that school counselors confront range from basic disability awareness to ability to participate in interagency collaboration. A comprehensive professional development plan is needed for school counselors as well as other members of transition teams. Inservice development of the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions is essential given that

most states and accrediting organizations do not require coursework in special education.

Research Findings

As a special educator I believe in a comprehensive services approach to providing adequate and effective transition services for students with disabilities. In the St. Mary's Area School District in Pennsylvania, school counselors and special education teachers function as collaborative partners throughout the transition process (Bugaj, 2000). The school counselor participates in the IEP conferences and answers questions related to programs and services that are designed to assist students with graduation. As an active member of the transition process, the school counselor's role is crucial in identifying available resources, course scheduling, and planning for graduation requirements.

Another example of a successful transition program is Iowa's High School High Tech (HSHT) computer training program which is designed to meet the postsecondary needs of students with mild disabilities (learning, physical, sensory, and behavioral disorders). The program is applauded for its efforts to provide real-world experiences, collaborative transition planning, and ongoing support for successful employment and higher education opportunities (Nietupski et al., 2004). Any student in the Cedar Rapids area with an IEP or Section 504 plan with an interest in technology is eligible for participation.

Highly qualified personnel operate the program to provide the computer and technical skills that students need for gainful employment. The HSHT is based on a conceptual framework that includes a high school and higher education preparation

component, as well as a workforce entry component. Results of Iowa's HSHT program indicate that there was a 200% growth in school presence, a 500% growth in student enrollment, a 600% growth in business partners, and a 100% growth in available sites for implementation. Additional data reveal almost 90% of the students who participated in the program were admitted to a community college.

Summary

Sitlington, Clark, and Kolstoe (2000) noted that persons with disabilities are valuable resources and have potentials that must be discovered, nurtured, and developed. In order for these potentials to be manifested, educators and other school professionals must invest time, effort, patience, and support in working with persons with disabilities. This is especially true when planning and coordinating transition services. It has been argued that one of the reasons for the lack of postsecondary success for students with disabilities is that many high school programs fail to provide adequate services needed to ensure success for these students (Johnson et al., 2002). Pierangelo and Giuliani (2004) agreed that schools should provide a wide range of transition services for students with disabilities to include instruction, transportation, community experiences, employment, and postsecondary educational activities. In doing so, the solicited involvement of local, state, and federal agencies is imperative to the academic and vocational success of students with disabilities.

Weishar and Borsa (2001) encouraged a collaborative approach to serving the needs of students with disabilities. This is where a shared decision making model is necessary to benefit the student and family (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Transition planning from this approach would involve the direct and ongoing participation of the school

counselor, building administrator, special and general educators, parents, students, and other interested persons.

As colleges and universities prepare current and future administrators to monitor and facilitate special education programs, the use of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders should be given consideration. Focus should be placed on standard six which emphasizes the role of the school administrator in promoting “the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context” (ISLLC, n.d). With this in mind it would be advantageous for school principals to use this standard when providing transition services for students with disabilities. Likewise, the role of the school counselor in the transition process is to provide academic preparation and planning for all students in a nondiscriminatory manner (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2000).

Together, special and general educators, school counselors, principals, students, families, and other key stakeholders can guarantee effective transition services for students with disabilities. It is my hope that building administrators and school counselors will rethink their role in providing a seamless approach to IEP implementation that will further promote more positive educational and vocational outcomes for students with disabilities. In this era of accountability, the needs of all students must be considered if we are serious about preparing them for the real world.

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Biographical Statement

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