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Aligning Transition Services with Secondary Educational Reform: A Position Statement of the Division on Career Development and Transition

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Abstract

Society has witnessed significant improvements in the lives of students receiving transition services over the past 30 years. The field of transition has developed an array of evidence-based interventions and promising practices, however, secondary school reform efforts have often overlooked these approaches for youth without disabilities. If we are to see improvements in postsecondary outcomes for all youth, reform efforts must begin with active participation of both general and special educators and critical home, school, and community stakeholders. In the Division on Career Development for Exceptional Individuals' position paper, we discuss the evolution of transition in light of reform efforts in secondary education. We review and identify secondary educational initiatives that embrace transition principles. Finally, recommendations are provided for advancing alignment of transition services with secondary education reforms.

Effective Transition: A Foundation for Secondary Education Reform

Because leaders such as Madeleine Will (1984) and Andrew Halpern (1985) crafted a vision of seamless transitions to adulthood for students with disabilities, and, particularly, since the 1990 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the provision of transition services has been part of the American educational landscape. Society has witnessed significant change in the lives of students receiving transition services over the past 30 years. Youth with disabilities are now more engaged in school and community, more likely to graduate, and have higher rates of employment and postsecondary enrollment than they two decades ago. (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). The alignment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the IDEA has led to increased access to general education curriculum for students with disabilities, as well as greater participation in school accountability systems. Seventy percent of all students with

disabilities take at least one academic class in general educational settings, a dramatic increase of students completing academic courses over the past 15 years (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2003). Nevertheless, it is universally acknowledged that US educational systems still must stem the tide of dropouts, increase postsecondary enrollment and completion, and guarantee rigorous post-school careers for all students (Kline & Williams, 2007).

State departments of education and local education agencies are required to report annually on indicators impacting secondary special education services, including appropriate transition planning, post-school outcomes, dropout and graduation rates, suspension and expulsion rates, and family involvement. Additionally, school accountability requirements under ESEA mandate disaggregating by disability some similar indicators (i.e., dropout, graduation rates). Such accountability aimed specifically at youth with disabilities has brought a renewed focus on transition for state special education agencies.

While the field of transition has developed and promoted an array of emerging evidence-based interventions and promising practices (c.f., Test, Fowler, et al., 2009), secondary school reform efforts have often overlooked, and indeed sometimes created, parallel approaches for youth without disabilities. If we are to improve postsecondary outcomes for all youth, educational reform efforts must begin with the coordinated engagement and active participation of both general and special secondary educators and critical home, school, and community stakeholders.

Over the years, the Division of Career Development and Transition (DCDT), has asserted both the rights of youth with disabilities to pursue high quality adult lives, as well as identified essential strategies for success (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer, 1998; Halpern, 1994; Sitlington, Neubert, LeConte, 1997; Trainor, Lindstrom, Simon-Burroughs, Martin, & Sorrells, 2007). At this critical juncture, we advocate to ensure that the voices of transition professionals, families, and transition-age students are included within the current call for secondary school reform. This position paper first discusses governmental perspectives of transition reform, as well as recent reform initiatives in secondary education. We then offer our recommendations to direct transition professionals to strengthen transition-focused initiatives for all students while working within general education contexts to create a unified system that prepares all students to succeed in adult life.

Federal Transition Policy: Emerging Initiatives and Mandates

Educational policy and practice have aimed at improving access to educational outcomes for all youth, including students with disabilities. Large-scale initiatives to improve the performance of high schools have occurred throughout the decades with support from government agencies, foundations, and organizations. Given that high school is the final level of compulsory schooling, preparing students for different postsecondary destinations often drives reform models. The expectation is to prepare students with skills and knowledge to successfully attain admission to higher education and the workforce (Rumberger, 2009). Four generations of reform illustrate parallel endeavors among general education and transition efforts (Kochhar-Bryant, 2008).

The first generation of federal transition policy started in the 1960s and continued into the late 1980s. It was characterized by attention to vocational education and career development as precursors to transition services and outcomes. During this time, a comprehensive review of vocational education demonstrated the value-added effects on student outcomes (Silverberg, Warner, Fong, & Goodwin, 2004). The career education movement gained momentum as a Federal priority first, with the passage of the 1963 Vocational Education Act (P.L. 88–210), and then the 1984 Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act (P.L. 98–524). These laws extended and improved existing programs and provided funds to states to assist special populations, including students with disabilities. Federal support for career education was further expanded in 1974 when the Office of Career Education was established and legislative mandates supported grant incentives to develop innovative career education models. As first articulated by Halpern (1985), by the mid-1980s, such federal priorities paved the way for the emergence of the transition movement for students with disabilities. The first significant federal “transition” priority was launched in 1984 with guidance from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) that introduced the concept of transition as a bridge from school to employment (Will, 1984). Along with such guidance, OSERS provided incentive funding to build capacity at state and local levels. Soon after, Halpern (1985) broadened this newly minted federal definition by incorporating concepts of community living and social relationships along with employment-focused outcomes.

The second wave of federal transition policy launched in the late 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s. It was driven by amendments to the IDEA in 1990 (PL 101–476) that defined transition services and, for the first time, mandated specific requirements of state and local special education agencies (a) identifying transition services within Individualized Education Programs (IEP), (b) linking with outside agencies, and (c) requiring state and local agencies to monitor and report student outcomes. Due to federal mandates, transition planning and services became integral to the provision of special education services for youth between the ages of 14 and 21 years old.

During this period of time, secondary education was impacted by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994. Jointly administered by the Department of Education and Department of Labor, this act was designed to address a growing national concern about the gap between the skills and education required to be competitive in the global economy and the knowledge, skills, and abilities of students exiting the U.S. educational system. The law called for integrating school-based learning with the real-world context of work for all students. The legislation was designed to jumpstart secondary school reform by providing seven years of implementation grants to states through the National School-to-Work Office. In summary, the second generation of federal transition policy saw the articulation of specific mandates for students with disabilities regarding planning for their transition to adulthood. Similarly, secondary educational systems paralleled transition mandates to fulfill the goal of career readiness and viability for all secondary-aged students.

The third generation of federal transition policy impacting special education began in the late-1990s and focused on improving academic achievement and accountability for all students. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), states were responsible for

implementing a single accountability system for all students based on strong academic standards. Particularly evident under NCLB, policy initiatives reflected the belief that improving education depended upon creating educational standards defining what students should know and be able to do (Jennings, 1995, 2000). More explicit guidance was provided with the 1994 and 1997 reauthorizations of IDEA that directed states to ensure that students with disabilities are involved with and progress in the general education curriculum and in state and local accountability measures. The standards-based reform movement shifted the attention of secondary educators from the work and career-preparation movements of the 1980s to academic performance outcomes (Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2001; Kochhar-Bryant & Vreeburg-Izzo, 2006).

The fourth and current generation of federal transition policy is distinguished by recent efforts to validate effective transition interventions. A steady increase in the volume of research targeting transition-related, evidence-based interventions associated with positive post-school outcomes has occurred over the past two decades (Alwell & Cobb, 2006; Test, Fowler, et al., 2009). First, the *What Works in Transition Research Synthesis Project* completed an analysis of over 100 transition-related studies published from 1984–2003. In a meta-analysis of 31 scientifically-based transition planning interventions, Cobb and Alwell (2009) found that student-focused planning strategies and student skill development improved transition-related outcomes for youth with disabilities. Additionally, a second review of 50 studies focused on curricular interventions provided tentative support for the efficacy of functional curricula in promoting positive transition-related outcomes (Alwell & Cobb, 2006).

In a more recent meta-analysis, Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, and Kohler, (2009) examined secondary transition practices to determine those that correlated with improved post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. They identified 16 predictors of post-school employment, education, and independent living that included interventions focused on curriculum and skill development, student self-advocacy, interagency collaboration, family involvement, transition planning, and school program structures. Additionally, 63 evidence-based practices have been identified that show moderate to high levels of evidence of effectiveness including such practices as student involvement in transition planning and self-advocacy/self-determination training; teaching a wide range of functional life (e.g., banking, self-management, leisure, personal health) and employment and career development skills; as well as family involvement interventions and utilizing community-based instruction and dropout prevention interventions.

Secondary federal transition policies have evolved from the early vocational education and training efforts to career development initiatives that provided opportunities to reform high school practices by connecting school-based learning with work-based learning, and most recently, by attending to academic standards to prepare students to be college and career ready. Current federal transition policy has articulated a vision to include ALL secondary youth, regardless of ability level. It is hoped that this as yet unfulfilled potential can lead to positive results for all youth.

The Current Picture of Educational Reform

In addition to federal transition policies, educational reform has also been promoted by national organizations and advocacy groups, in response to ongoing concerns regarding secondary educational experiences not sufficiently preparing youth for college and careers of the future. Concerns raised by such groups as the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Governors Association, and the Chief State Schools Officers have produced educational policies and initiatives that take the long view of education by creating a systematic approach to education, from preschool to postsecondary outcomes. Additionally, efforts to develop tiered interventions focused on improving academic achievement, as well as behavioral outcomes have emerged in response to ongoing low academic performance of certain groups of students. Federal legislation regarding education has both improved school experiences for youth with disabilities, but also maintained separate efforts among general and special educators. These issues will be described to frame the current contexts within which transition practitioners and advocates can find both opportunities, as well as barriers to ensuring positive post-school outcomes for all students.

Education Reform Efforts

Beginning in 1996, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) outlined a challenge to education leaders with the publications of *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (1997); and *Breaking Ranks II* (2004). These documents, along with the most recent version (*Breaking Ranks*, 2011), synthesized education reform efforts and outlined three core areas: (a) providing collaborative leadership, professional development, and strategic use of data; (b) personalizing the school environment; and (c) making learning personal: curriculum, instruction and assessment (NASSP, 2004). The NASSP recommendations aligned with IDEA's focus on shared responsibility, youth empowerment, and academic and functional performance. *Breaking Ranks I and II* outlined a vision incorporating nine themes to guide high schools into the 21st century:

1. A community committed to demonstrable academic achievement;
2. An experience in transition to the next stage in life for every student with the understanding that "ultimately each person needs to earn a living";
3. A gateway to multiple options;
4. A place to prepare lifelong learners;
5. A provision of the necessities for developing good citizens for "full participation in the life of a democracy";
6. A place where students are helped to develop as social as well as academic beings;
7. A place where students learn to be comfortable in a technological society;
8. A place where students become equipped for life in an internationally interdependent world;
9. A place that "unabashedly advocates in behalf of young people" (p.2).

Breaking Ranks II (2004) offered specific strategies to improve student performance. These strategies included (a) advancement of core knowledge, (b) interactions and connections with students, (c) a comprehensive advisory program for students, (d) use of a variety of instructional strategies and assessments, (e) flexible use of scheduled time, (f) structural leadership changes, and (g) continuous professional development for educational professionals. The 31 recommendations articulated in *Breaking Ranks II*, when taken together, have the potential to form a foundation for improving the performance of each student. In particular, the 31 recommendations support strategies that could be used to embed transition into the broader picture of high school redesign; for example, “The content of the curriculum, where practical, should connect to real-life applications of knowledge and skills to help students link their education to the future”

In 2005, the National Governors’ Association (NGA) focused attention on the dropout rate for American high schools. These efforts were intertwined within state-based efforts to establish effective practices beginning in preschool and culminating with a college degree or a career credential (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2010). Commonly known as P-16, these efforts are championed by national and state educational stakeholder groups (National Conference of State Legislatures). In some states, the business community or the state’s Department of Labor is the driving force; in others, P-16 initiatives claim their roots in education reform, higher education initiatives, or community advancement campaigns. Today, over 30 states have active P-16 initiatives (ECS, 2010). P-16 reform initiatives have focused on models connecting stakeholders from across educational and workforce systems to support children and youth as they move through the school years into higher education and full employment.

Most recently, the NGA and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) launched an initiative to develop continuity across state standards and align goals regarding the performance of American students. The Common Core State Standards, known as, *College and Career Ready Standards (CCSS)*, were finalized in June 2010 and are being adopted by the majority of states (NGA, 2010). Potentially, the CCSS will impact how transition services can respond to the academic supports and planning necessary to be college and career ready. For example, one initiative, *Ready by 21*, articulates an educational system targeting academic rigor by addressing academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and career supports across the lifespan of the student. For transition personnel, this expanded focus within general educational offers a potential vehicle for special educators to develop strategies to support the unique needs of all secondary students.

RTI and Tiered Interventions in Secondary Schools

With the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, response to intervention (RTI) was introduced as an alternative method for identifying students with specific learning disabilities (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). Although not mandated, a majority of states have implemented some form of elementary-based RTI (or tiered intervention), either for learning disability determination (Berkley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009), or for academic and behavioral outcomes (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). A critical feature of RTI is the utilization of a multi-tiered system of intervention as an approach to prevention

(Horner & Sugai, 2006). Such multi-tiered intervention systems are designed by organizing increasingly intense academic and behavioral interventions delivered across school environments such as general, remedial, and special education (Koveski & Black, 2010).

Most states have begun to implement RTI tiered interventions within secondary educational systems; yet there is a paucity of research addressing their scope and the impact of RTI among secondary schools (Danielson, Roberts, & Scala, 2010). Emergent data have indicated applications of tiered interventions at the secondary level can impact math, reading, and behavior, but only if certain adjustments to the basic infrastructure of secondary schools are in place (Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009). Without evidence-based approaches to applying tiered intervention models to secondary schools, educators only have best guesses for what components will work (Samuels, 2010). While efforts are underway to distinguish between elementary and secondary RTI (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2010; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2010), thus far, the dialogue has maintained a traditional RTI (i.e., reading, math, behavior) focus without considering the unique aspects of adolescent learners and secondary contextual factors. However, the argument for using an adolescent learner and transition-focused frame of reference to inform and enhance tiered interventions models in secondary schools is emerging among transition advocates (Morningstar, Gaumer, & Noonan, 2009).

The first core feature of a secondary/transition tiered intervention model should be integrating school resources to maximize the capacity of general and specialized educational supports across all tiers of support. Collaboration across educational services (general and specialized) should also include outside and community agencies and supports such as postsecondary settings, employers, and community mental health agencies. A second core feature, developing systems for monitoring progress based on multiple sources of data, should include more than academic and behavioral data, and must integrate and target critical factors influencing graduation rates, as well as post-school success (i.e., decreasing dropout rates, decreasing suspension/expulsion, increasing school engagement). Finally, the dynamic quality of applying greater levels of intensity where needed is critical in preventing school failure for all students; this should be accomplished by directly engaging students using evidence-based, targeted, and increasingly intensive interventions. Given the developmental differences of adolescents (as opposed to elementary students), these interventions must consider the importance of student engagement and self-efficacy research citing youth who see themselves as members of the learning community as most likely to succeed (Brozo, 2009; Conlon, Zimmer-Gembeck, Creed & Tucker, 2006; Rebora, 2010; Reed & Vaughn, 2010). In sum, secondary tiered interventions should continue to focus on academic skills, but also promote school engagement and relevant educational experiences to ensure dropout prevention, as well as preparation for college and careers.

Transition and General Education: A Merging of Systems

As has been emphasized, the most recent reauthorizations of IDEA have aligned special education with general education school reform efforts. Since the 1997 reauthorization, IDEA has required all students receiving special education services be involved with, and progress in, the general education curriculum and that the IEP document supplementary aids and services, specially designed instruction (i.e., special education) and related services.

These services help to ensure such involvement and progress so the student is educated to the maximum extent with his or her peers without disabilities. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA changed the definition of transition services to include a focus “on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities ...” [34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)]. The Act also added language to allow States to expend Part B funds in the “development and implementation of transition programs, including coordination of services with agencies involved in supporting the transition of students with disabilities to postsecondary activities well as to ensure that the student’s “other educational needs” are met” [34 CFR 300.704(b)(4)(vi)] [20 U.S.C. 1411(e)(2)(C)(vi)].

Considered in retrospect, many of the language changes pertaining to transition services within IDEA 2004 were intended to emphasize the importance of high expectations for students receiving special education services to transition to post-secondary education and employment, or borrowing the secondary reform phrase, to be “college and career ready” (*Blueprint for Reform*, 2010). Indeed, within the written purposes of IDEA, it is articulated that all children with disabilities have available a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.

What is at the heart of any presumed disconnect between secondary school reform efforts and transition lies not in efforts to align IDEA with federal school reform policies, but in the fact that such alignment efforts have not gone far enough. As long as transition services are considered as part of “other educational needs” and only focused on the IEPs of students receiving special education services, then transition will continued to be viewed as a “disability only” phenomena. The clear solution to this problem is to move transition services to be part of the general education curriculum and that will only happen if the field of transition aligns with the field of secondary general education and becomes part of secondary school reform. In the next section, we will specify recommendations for promoting transition policies and practices within secondary school reform.

Recommendations for Future Policy and Practices

In truth, the gulf between transition services in special education and secondary school reform is less dramatic than might be presumed. Secondary school reform models often emphasize what are considered to be effective transition interventions. For example, Test, Fowler, Kohler, & Kortering (2010) identified 33 evidence-based transition practices, as well as 16 predictors of post-school success (Test, Fowler, et al., 2009) which align well with current efforts at secondary reform. Despite perceptions to the contrary, secondary school reform and transition-focused practices are not incompatible elements of educational programming. As far back as 1995, Newmann and Wehlage described standards for authentic pedagogy that identified high quality instruction focusing beyond school by enabling students to make connections about knowledge they have gained and applying it to public problems, as well as personal experiences.

The Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) believes that all students are entitled to access to strategies and supports that enable them to make choices and decisions in school, at home, and in their communities so that in the future, they may live as productive, satisfied adults. Inherent in this belief is the right to participate fully in all aspects of the school community, including academic, functional, extracurricular, and social opportunities. Given this, DCDT also acknowledges obstacles inherent in the current secondary education system that may prevent many students from receiving an optimal experience. What is needed is an effort on the part of secondary special education and transition professionals and advocates to fully understand secondary reform efforts so as to ensure that transition policies and practices coalesce with secondary general education to produce schools that, *de rigueur*, provide all students with a future vision, and a myriad of opportunities with which to assist them to achieve this vision. We offer the following recommendations for such blended reform:

1. Policy and advocacy practices within DCDT and its members should systematically and explicitly align with current secondary education reform efforts. These practices should also focus on engaging with the IDEA and ESEA reauthorization processes.
2. Transition practitioners must collaboratively and equally engage with secondary educators, including infusing transition-focused competencies throughout curriculum and content for all students.
3. Educators must work closely with families and students to ensure that they have a voice in a student's own educational planning. This includes full student advocacy coupled with a welcoming school environment that meets the individual academic, social, and transition needs of each student.

Policy and Advocacy Practices Should Explicitly Align with Current Secondary Education Reform Efforts

If there is any doubt that the purposes of transition services for students receiving special education services and the needs of all students overlap, one only needs consider the report from the National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org) titled *Preparing High School Students for Successful Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Employment* (Bangser, 2008). This report identified the “Key Issue” that needed to be addressed as “[s]tudents’ high school experiences often do not prepare them adequately for postsecondary education and the world of work” (p. 4). The report concluded the importance of aligning high school curricula, graduation standards, and assessments with the expectations of postsecondary educational institutions and employers. Bangser (2008) also recommended holding high schools accountable for preparing graduates for the demands of postsecondary education and today’s information-based work-force. Increasing accountability would also require creating a system for tracking students across the K-12 and postsecondary education systems and into the workplace. Of course, under IDEA and for the past decade, states and districts have been required to track students with disabilities into postsecondary outcomes. As a result, developing longitudinal data systems for tracking all youth exiting high school is

a natural step, and one that should be strongly encouraged by transition advocates and practitioners.

Over one decade ago, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF, 2000) described key elements for quality high schools for all students as requiring high academic standards while embracing a youth development approach to reflect the “community’s expectations of knowledge and skills needed for full and meaningful adult lives and participation in a civil society” (p. vi). Recommendations included the importance of mentors who establish a meaningful relationship with the youth that allows authentic learning to extend to work and community. The reforms presented in the AYPF report reflect numerous secondary transition evidence-based practices as identified by Test, Fowler, et al. (2009), including, community-based instruction, as well as promoting self-determination and student involvement in educational planning. In fact, Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, and Mason (2004) pointed out that rather than sounding a death knell, the standards-based reform movement provided a unique opportunity to integrate instruction promoting self-determination into broader educational practices.

Conceptually, transition under IDEA has evolved from providing narrowly defined practical skills delivered by special education personnel to an array of effective transition practices coordinated, supported, personalized, and delivered across school and community settings. Services once delivered almost exclusively by special educators are now considered to be a “results-oriented process” requiring all educators, teachers, school support personnel, related service providers, and community service providers. The reauthorizations of both ESEA and IDEA will be upon us soon enough. It is imperative that transition professionals are at the table to provide strong conceptual language that mirrors secondary reform while keeping true to the tenets of the provision of transition services. As we advocate for a blended system of reform efforts, the field of transition can provide the evidence base needed to develop legislation and policy for all secondary students

Transition Practitioners Must Engage with Secondary Educators

Ensuring transition is infused throughout curriculum and content for all students will require focused collaboration with general education systems and professionals. While special education is not the only provider of transition services, special educators continue to be responsible for implementing the processes that ensure access to transition services and guarantee key indicators of compliance with these requirements. They are the markers on a path to adulthood that is focused on the young adult, and collaboratively supported by school, agencies, and family. Yet, where special education is still a separate system with a major responsibility for transition, indicators may show little more than paper compliance (Cashman, 2008).

Responsibility for transition programming, once assumed almost exclusively by special educators, is now best suited within the general secondary education context. This evolution places special educators as a critical partner, not the sole provider, in developing effective transition services for students with disabilities. Secondary education reform has embraced the same ideals of planning for students’ futures that the field of transition has held for decades. However, the knowledge, skills, and experiences of transition professionals will not

be shared until special educators and transition practitioners understand, and actively participate in current school reform initiatives (Morningstar & Clark, 2003). Special educators and administrators must be willing to become collaborators in the sharing of responsibility for transition planning and services for all youth in favor of overall school reform that can, hopefully, prepare youth for “lifelong learning, civic involvement, leadership, and careers” (AYPF, 2000, p. vi.).

We would argue that transition services for students receiving special education services and the needs of all students overlap. Bangser’s (2008) recommendations for transforming high schools to support post-school outcomes incorporate concepts that secondary special educators already embrace: to align relevant high school curricula, graduation standards, and student engagement with postsecondary educational institutions and employers. This position paper advocates for holding high schools accountable for preparing all graduates for the demands of postsecondary education and ultimately for an information-based workforce. Again, emerging accountability systems require creating a system for tracking students across the K-12 and postsecondary education systems and into the workplace, and special education can assist by sharing the lessons learned from accumulating IDEA data over the past decade, as states and districts collected students with disabilities’ postsecondary outcomes.

Transition practitioners must also become engaged in providing tiered intervention systems within secondary schools which have the potential to fundamentally restructure secondary schools, but only if planned and implemented by acknowledging the broader focus of secondary schools as facilitating post-school success for all students. If we are to develop highly effective secondary models, education in general needs to consider the following issues:

1. The current implementation of RTI and tiered interventions in secondary schools may not be sufficient to engage students and promote positive post-school outcomes if the focus is only on academic and behavioral skills. All secondary educators and administrators must consider the importance of preparing students for postsecondary outcomes and incorporate student-initiated goals and expectations for the future. Strategies to promote self-regulated learning and self-directed planning, a hallmark of special education practice, can be of equal value for adolescents without disabilities. Expanding the focus of these efforts to ensure that all adolescents are college and career ready will significantly improve post-school outcomes.
2. Merging academic skills within transition-focused competencies is critical. Secondary special educators and transition advocates can collaborate with general education professionals to develop interventions that blend both sets of skills, such as, a literacy program that employs relevant and contextualized content as the basis of instruction. A relevant educational experience mirrors the intent of transition as it connects current academic practice to future goals, knowledge, and skills.
3. The secondary school reform efforts must be maintained along with tiered interventions. Preliminary research points toward factors such as the realignment

and reconfiguration of high schools as critical to successful implementation of RTI. We need to consider that RTI was not initially designed as a comprehensive school reform model, and particularly not within secondary schools. Therefore, a critical role of transition advocates and practitioners is to ensure that school reform, tiered interventions, and transition-focused practices are developed to support all students.

Given the current directions within secondary school reform, we must look beyond special education. We must understand broader system reform and identify provisions that have potential to advance transition under IDEA. Our efforts to improve transition must draw on the aligned initiatives to improve the broader system of education while we continue to develop specialized services that may be required to support students with disabilities.

Educators Must Work Closely with Families and Students to Ensure that they have a Voice

A key element of school reform is the role students and families can, and should, play. It is imperative that secondary educators collaborate with families and students to ensure they have a voice in not only individualized educational planning, but as critical representatives and consumers of reform. This includes full student advocacy coupled with a welcoming school environment that meets the individual academic, social, and transition needs of each student.

Students' role—The youth role in transition, once conceptualized as a passive recipient, has been transformed into a student-centered, youth-guided process. Responsibility for transition programming, once assumed to be almost exclusively the responsibility of special education, has been squarely placed on school districts through a series of legal challenges and administrative decisions. This evolution places special education as a critical partner, not the sole provider, in developing effective transition services for students with disabilities.

For students with disabilities, reform efforts potentially have an even more powerful impact. To capitalize on developing opportunities and to build appreciation of the knowledge base in transition, special educators and transition personnel must have an understanding of these emerging reform strategies. Nearly all of secondary reform initiatives emphasize strong student advocacy and choice making as a hallmark of the changing social mores of secondary professionals (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004).

There is an emerging evidence-base that instruction to promote self-determination and student-directed learning results in student acquisition of foundational skills leading to enhanced self-determination (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009), enhanced self-determination (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, & Soukup, in press; Wehmeyer, Shogren, Palmer, Williams-Diehm, Little, & Boulton, 2012), as well as increased academic and transition goal attainment and access to the general education curriculum (Carter, 2010; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, in press). Although there are few validations of these models for youth without disabilities in secondary schools, promoting self-determination has been linked to improved student success by general education reformers (American Psychological Association, 2004). Further, active student

involvement in planning is a common feature of many school reform models (Martin et al., 2004). As transition and secondary reform coalesce, promoting the self-determination of all students will become an entry point for intervention. Educational reform efforts can benefit from the strong history of promoting self-determination that the field of transition has to offer. It behooves us to consciously work within school systems to impart these concepts and skills across all aspects for the school community.

Family's role—Family support of youth with disabilities is associated with the achievement of post-school outcomes such as employment, postsecondary education, community living, and engagement in the community (Devlieger & Trach, 1999; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Additionally, greater levels of family involvement leads to higher reading levels, better grades, and positive school engagement (Newman, 2005). During transition, the active role of family members has proven to be an essential element to the success of students with disabilities. In many circumstances, once a student leaves school, the primary means of support, guidance, and advocacy falls to the family and the student's support network (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Youth with disabilities have described the positive impact their families have played in ensuring successful adult lives after high school, particularly as it pertained to the development of specific career expectations (Lindstrom, Benz, & Doren, 2004; Morningstar, 1997).

Family involvement in schools has involved the dynamic exchange of multiple roles, responsibilities, and perspectives and may require even greater transformations as we move forward with secondary school reform initiatives. IDEA sets the expectation that parents assume a leadership role in their child's educational planning process, thus, professionals and schools are urged to not only collaborate with, but engage families. Family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community organizations are committed to working with families in meaningful ways so that families actively support their children's learning and development (Harvard Family Research Project, 2009). Engaging families in secondary schools has been directly related to a range of benefits for students, including higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of high school graduation.

Transition planning is most successful when it involves the family and considers cultural values and beliefs (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Wehmeyer, Morningstar, & Husted, 1999; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Professional understanding of family cultural norms can influence family involvement and satisfaction with transition planning (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). Acknowledging the family's values and beliefs promotes increased cultural reciprocity because professionals take steps toward identifying their own beliefs, as well as those of the family when planning for transition (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, & Powers, 2008;).

Implementing effective family engagement in schools depends upon whose shoes you are standing in. Family members and educators often have differing perceptions of what is the best way for parents to be involved with schools. For example, teachers may define parental

involvement as helping children with homework; while parents may see a role that includes being active decision-makers in the school (Epstein, 2001; Wandry & Pleet, 2003). Parental involvement can be as varied as the families and schools in each neighborhood and community, and ensuring families are actively engaged at the secondary level will require collaboration among all school staff. One approach is to develop an action team to organize and sustain school, family, and community partnerships such as those developed by the National Network of Partnership Schools (Epstein et al., 2002). Given the evidence that families matter for school and post-school success, transition practitioners, as well as school leadership must consider how to identify and support strategies to increase family engagement both at school and in the home. This will require all members of the school community outreaching to families through newsletters, online access to grades, and school events such as college fairs. Additionally, working with parent support organizations can ensure closer ties to families. Utilizing parent liaisons who can outreach and mentor parents individually reinforces a commitment to family engagement and offers an intensive approach to supporting families (Harvard Family Research Project, 2009).

Conclusion

Secondary education reform efforts in the United States have occurred since there were schools that ostensibly needed changing. Elite “Latin Academies” were established in 1635 to educate the sons of wealthy American landowners, while Benjamin Franklin first proposed secondary public schools that would teach useful subjects such as geometry, English, astronomy, navigation, gardening, and good citizenship to American youth beyond the aristocracy. In 1827, Massachusetts became the first state to pass a law requiring towns of more than 4,000 to establish free public high schools based on two tracks, one college preparatory, and the other vocational bound. Since the late 1800s and into the 20th century, the course of secondary education has moved in fits and spurts. Secondary education embraced millions of youth attending high school due to new prosperity and urbanization as schools struggled to meet the needs of all students through academic and vocational tracks. Reformers responded to the Sputnik challenge in 1957 calling for renewed interest in math and science. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* detailed the “rising tide of mediocrity” (George et al., 2000, p. 28) of the American school system, calling for strengthened graduation requirements and increased scrutiny of individual student academic progress. Today, educational reform calls for both specific accountability measures and a means by which to prepare lifelong learners. It desires to prepare young adults to assume full participation in the citizenry of our nation, much like the vision of Benjamin Franklin 250 years ago. And, secondary reform efforts embrace all elements of a diverse society, including ability and disability. It behooves us, then, to fully engage in this new and exciting journey. We must share what we know about the transition of youth with disabilities while in turn learning the lessons forged over the last century. If we are not willing to become full participants in secondary education reform, we will continue to be relegated to the sidelines, thus compromising the youth whom we so passionately represent.

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