

Chapter 6:
**Realizing
the Vision:
Creating the
Path and Traveling
Together**

“Honest differences of views and honest debate are not disunity. They are the vital process of policy making among free men.”

—Herbert Clark Hoover
1874-1964, American
31st American President

Introduction

During the opening of the 2002 Disability and Employment Conference in Washington D.C., representatives from the fields of education, special education and rehabilitation made commitments that should serve as the driving force in creating an environment of moving from compliance to a commitment to youth with disabilities. Rod Paige, the Secretary of Education, made it clear that “ensuring an educated and a skilled workforce is a cornerstone of our (Department of Education) strategic plan.” Assistant Secretary, OSERS, Robert H. Pasternack, Ph.D. described as part of his job to “help strengthen the linkages and partnerships between vocational rehabilitation and special education.” Joanne Wilson, Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), committed to providing the support needed to “provide seamless service to individuals with disabilities transitioning from secondary education.” These leaders spoke of the passion that is shared by those who work in the field of rehabilitation and education to create a vision of the “way it should be” for persons with disabilities.

This chapter provides a snapshot of the document’s key concepts and lays the path for community transition teams to achieve their vision.

Blueprint for Success

The writers of “Investing in the Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Productive Careers,” invite you to share our vision:

Empowered youth with disabilities access the community of their choice to achieve their desired careers, life-long learning and a rich quality of life.

As a foundation, it is important for *all* transition partners to understand the spirit of the law, which is beautifully stated in the purpose statement of the Rehabilitation Act.

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to

- (a) live independently;
- (b) enjoy self-determination;
- (c) make choices;
- (d) contribute to society;
- (e) pursue meaningful careers; and
- (f) enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic,

political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society (P.L. 105-220).

To be grounded, it is also critical to expand your knowledge of the requirements of legislation; share this knowledge with others at the local, State and national levels; educate youth and families, direct service staff, management and administration of all transition team partners; take a leadership role, and be open to new ways to create a seamless system of transition.

The most important partners in transition are the student and family. The student’s dreams, interests, and goals should drive transition planning. Students should be given every opportunity to understand their options and lead the process. These are skills that youth must develop with appropriate supports and opportunities. Depending upon their disability and its effects, levels of self-advocacy and self-determination differ, but ALL students need to know and practice self-advocacy and self-determination skills. Although families come to the transition process from many different circumstances, certain kinds of information and technical assistance from VR and the transition team are essential. This includes information about entitlement versus eligibility; community supports, including agencies programs, services and funding; career and employment options; post-secondary educational requirements; and community living opportunities.

The importance of empowering youth with disabilities and their families in the transition process is under-girded by certain assumptions:

- Transition is a normal process for all families in our society.
- Youth with disabilities have the capacity to be productively and competitively employed in high-quality jobs and careers.
- With proper information and supports, families of youth with disabilities have the capacity to support successful transition.

Identifying and building the transition community requires leadership of ALL partners. As evidenced in the array of potential collaboration and partnerships, many people, government agencies, and organizations have distinct roles *and* responsibilities to ensure the successful transition of youth to productive careers. Identify potential partners and develop a strategy to build relationships with each of them individually and collectively.

To build collaboration, key people must be brought to the table and convinced of how they can benefit from the partnership (WIIFM: What’s in it for me?). Develop and implement State and local interagency agreements. The State interagency agreements required by law bring partners to the table and establish the foundation for movement from compliance to commitment . Build capacity and incentives through demonstration projects. Sustain involvement of committed individuals by setting attainable goals and achieving them. Develop relationships with complementary initiatives. Involve all stakeholders. Use evaluation information for continuous improvement (Guy and Schriener, 1997).

Realizing the Vision: Creating the Path and Traveling Together

It is every transition team partner’s equal responsibility to provide both leadership and solutions to address the barriers in every community. It is not the young adult’s responsibility. We must move from the legal, regulatory, compliance walls to embracing the spirit of the law. We must keep our eye on the student, empowerment, and informed choices. DO NOT CREATE BARRIERS BY ENFORCING THE LETTER OF THE LAW. It is the

responsibility of transition team members to develop potential solutions, be creative, work as a collaborative community and clear the path throughout the transition planning process.

This means transition partners must be proactive, not reactive, and anticipate barriers and develop creative solutions and strategies as a community. There are no magical answers. These solutions MUST be developed at a local level, and be focused on the dreams and aspirations of youth with disabilities. There is a delicate balance between setting the youth up for failure, and providing them with an opportunity to explore their dreams. This approach creates an environment where students can learn the skills to become self-determined, learn from their experiences, and reach for options beyond the commonly-accepted low expectations of society. As a transition team, we must listen carefully to students' dreams and aspirations, and look at the students' strengths and abilities, NOT disabilities and limitations. Raising the bar and expecting that students must be challenged to take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood, will lead to the vision:

Empowered youth with disabilities access the community of their choice to achieve their desired careers, life-long learning and rich quality of life.

Community Transition Teams: A Practical Guide

The formation of community transition teams and team activities are the cornerstone of real change in transition programs and this must occur at a local level (Blalock, 1996). There are several levels of transition teams.

1. The *IEP team* helps students to identify, plan, and achieve future post-secondary goals. School-based transition committees may work to make curricular changes, integrating vocational assessment into transition planning, and developing instructional options.
2. *Community and/or regional transition teams* identify common goals, action plans, problem-solve through interagency collaboration, create community-based options for students, seek funding, implement action plans, and connect to the State-level efforts.
3. The *state-level transition team* is the vehicle for promoting interagency collaboration. This team promotes effective transition models, provides training and technical assistance across the State, and maintains communication and support for the transition community.

Steps outlined in this IRI document will assist members of the transition community to organize and form local transition teams and to develop the foundation of community collaboration. Moving collaborative efforts to action is the key to clearing the path for results.

Blalock (1996) outlines steps that can be taken by community transition teams to effectively impact the post-secondary outcomes of youth with disabilities:

- *Community Needs Assessments* can involve individual and district-wide student outcomes data from follow-up studies, program evaluation, surveys of interested parties, and brainstorming sessions of the team to identify strengths and needs related to transition. This is the foundation of the teams' ongoing efforts.

- *Action Plans* must be established within the local community context. The action plan must include a philosophical framework, with the creation of a mission statement, and options for achieving the mission.
- *Education, Training, and Employment Opportunities* must be created by the team to meet individual student needs. This may involve going beyond typical school and agency constraints to establish community-based innovative programs and strategies.
- *Staff Training and Technical Assistance* should focus on team building, building meaningful mission statements, understanding group dynamics, and establishing action plans and priorities through the collaborative process.
- *Interagency Collaboration and Shared Resources* may be a shift in the culture of educators and agencies because of the history of working independently, rather than interdependently. The use of State and local interagency agreements, as outlined in Chapter 5 may establish the framework needed. Community transition teams may require external levels of support and facilitation such as guidance on the teaming process, information on best practices in transition, assistance in problem-solving, and training of team members to carry out their roles and responsibilities.
- *Monitoring and Evaluation of Team Progress* must be a formal process to ensure that the community transition teams' efforts are on target to impact the successful transition of youth with disabilities from school to post-secondary education and training, employment, and community living.

FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Local Community Transition Teams

Minnesota's System of Interagency Collaboration

To achieve this goal Minnesota has developed a statewide effort to coordinate and improve its current service delivery system that supports transition-aged youth with disabilities as they move from secondary education to adult life. One vehicle to drive this effort is through the development of the local Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs). The goals of the CTICs are to develop local partnerships within communities that address: 1) interagency collaboration; 2) transition issues within the local communities; 3) exchanging agency information; and, 4) designing local systems to gather follow-up data.

Each CTIC develops an annual plan to include a needs assessment, action plan, and evaluation methods. For additional information, visit the System of Interagency Coordination (MnSIC) Web site at <http://www.mnsic.org/default.html>.

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Factors related to successful interagency collaboration were identified in a study of stakeholders from nine state departments and three private social services agencies in Ohio that implemented policy related to early childhood special education and Head Start (Johnson, Zorn, Kai Yung Tam, Lamontagne, & Johnson, 2003):

These data suggest that interagency collaboration is multidimensional; interactional, and developmental. That is, there are many factors that contribute to the success of an interagency collaboration. Moreover, these factors are interactional in nature and interrelate to contribute to a successful or unsuccessful interagency collaboration. Finally, it seemed that the successful interagency collaborations were developmental in nature, in that they needed time and work to reach a successful outcome. Interviewees described collaborations improving as parties learned to understand each other and to work together. Given the developmental nature of collaboration, preplanning and continued hard work and support were needed for it to continue to be successful. Synthesizing data from all five questions, it appeared that there were seven factors that were most important to successful interagency collaborations:

- Commitment,
- Communication,
- Strong leadership from key decision makers,
- Understanding the culture of collaborating agencies,
- Engaging in serious preplanning,
- Providing adequate resources for collaboration, and
- Minimizing turf issues.

These factors are interrelated and can be summed up into three major variables for promoting successful collaboration:

- Commitment,
- Communication, and
- Strong leadership.

Harbin (1996) described state agencies “as separate, autonomous units, with separate missions and resources ... a primary operating principle of an organization (in this case, an agency) [parentheses added] is to protect its boundaries” (p. 73). One solid way to break the rigid boundaries can be by adamant commitment, enhanced communication, and strong leadership that ensures the allocation of adequate resources and minimizes the impact of “turf issues.” Sharing experiences regarding successful collaboration might educate participating agencies or individuals that interagency collaboration is a “doable” mission. Learning from the mistakes of unsuccessful collaborations can help overcome barriers that might jeopardize a future interagency collaboration. Successful collaboration does not happen by accident (p. 201).

TAKE ACTION TODAY

Forming a Community Transition Team

- Bring partners to the table.
- Learn the language of other transition team partners.
- Understand the legislative basis of other systems, and respect differing perspectives and priorities.
- Share literature with other members of the transition community about your program and services.
- As a team, develop a cross-systems “cheat sheet” of transition resources and distribute widely.
- Share knowledge of transition resources through many media (written materials, web sites, and training).
- Go to schools and other agencies to provide consultation and technical assistance. Learn how to be an effective consultant. (see Appendix E)
- Develop state and local Transition Resource Guides jointly for use by students, parents, agency staff, and educators (see Appendix D).

Referral Process

- Develop a referral process that works for all members of the team, especially the student and parent. Make sure youth do not fall through the cracks (especially 504 students).
- Establish an interagency referral form.
- Establish a list of existing documents and information that needs to be exchanged between partners at the time of referral.
- Identify the referral triggers.
- Clearly identify when a partner is able to provide consultation and technical assistance versus receiving a referral of the student.
- And again, MAKE SURE STUDENTS DO NOT FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS BETWEEN THE ARTIFICIAL LINES OF THE SYSTEMS!

Assessment and Transfer of Useful Information and Determining Eligibility

- Develop a shared definition of assessment, and be clear on assessment to determine eligibility versus assessment for transition planning purposes. Understand and respect the requirements across systems lines for assessment information.
- Always remember; DO NOT reinvent the wheel.
- Stay focused on assessment that will lead to the transition of students to post-secondary outcomes.

- Develop cross-systems strategies of assessment.
- Gather ongoing information from the student and their family.
- Develop study portfolios that the student owns. This will promote the sharing of relevant information across systems.
- Utilize community-based, real-life assessments whenever possible. These experiences can be jointly developed by the community transition team.
- AVOID STARTING OVER! Make sure the student has an individualized assessment needed to transition to post-secondary education and training, employment, and community living.

Planning: Aligning the IPE and IEP and other plans

- There are several types of transition planning meetings: the IEP team meeting, the community transition team meetings, training and technical assistance meetings, meetings with the student and family to provide services. Plan ahead, be honest about availability of time, and agree on who will participate for what reasons and when. Do not get lost in the “invitation” process.
- How many plans does a student need to prepare for transition to adult life? The answer is simple: one life = one plan.
- It is the responsibility of the community transition team to coordinate planning efforts, to remain focused on students’ dreams and aspirations, and to work collaboratively to help youth achieve post-secondary goals.
- Discuss how the team will resolve conflicts regarding funding, services, roles, and responsibilities.
- AVOID STARTING OVER! Identify the roles and responsibilities of the student, family, and members of the community transition teams to help youth achieve their goals.

Transition Services

- As a team, identify whose responsibility it is to pay for what, based upon the parameters of the law and need of the students.
- Make sure there is a plan to ensure that technology stays with the student when transitioning from education to adult agencies.
- Create a continuum of services, such as job coaching, to avoid interruption or change in service and service provider.
- If a student needs a service, work as a community transition team to establish it and find collaborative ways to fund the program. Recognize that this is a shared responsibility.

- Establish summer collaborative projects to expand community-based experiences in the area of work, post-secondary education and training, and community living.
- AVOID STARTING OVER!

Conclusion: Achieving Successful Outcomes

The payoff to effective community transition team work is to see the vision become a reality:

Empowered youth with disabilities access the community of their choice to achieve their desired careers, life-long learning and a rich quality of life.

This chapter provided a snapshot of the key concepts to arrive at the critical crossroad of *Creating a Path and Traveling Together* phase of the transition planning: *Realizing the Vision*. These strategies move local transition initiatives to realize this vision through the work of community transition teams.