

Chapter 7:
**Learning
as a
Community:
Training
& Technical
Assistance**

“Knowledge has to be improved, challenged, and increased constantly, or it vanishes”

—Peter F. Drucker
1909- , American Management
Consultant, Author

Introduction

The roles of transition partners—youth, families and professionals—were described in previous chapters. Competencies and skills are necessary to fulfill these roles effectively. Transition professionals from special education and VR must meet high standards for credentials and demonstrate rigorous proficiency to maintain certification. Even so, many of the skills and competencies needed for effective collaboration and empowerment of youth with disabilities come, not from academic training, but from vision, values and respect for people.

IDEA (1997) and the Rehabilitation Act include provisions that speak to the preparation of persons providing services to individuals with disabilities and their families as a whole. IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act include the preparation of other service professionals in the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development. IDEA also outlines preparation of parents as professionals.

This chapter will address knowledge domains for youth with disabilities and their families and research-based competencies for professionals. There will be cross training needs identified and strong recommendations for learning together. Bruns and Fowler (1999, May/June) emphasize the importance of four considerations or critical skills of transition staff;

- Continuity,
- Communication,
- Collaboration, and
- Family concerns.

These considerations are an example of the kinds of skills that benefit all stakeholders in their transition journey from compliance to commitment.

Basic Premises, Guiding Principles

To address the learning needs of youth, their families and professionals in transition, the 28th IRI Prime Study Group adopted some guidelines for success.

- A general, shared knowledge base is essential for compliance; a shared vision is essential for commitment.
- Cross-systems training strategies build mutual respect and understanding of multiple perspectives.
- Everyone involved in transition planning must hear the same messages.

- All transition partners bring unique insights to the process. Professionals don't have all the answers and must be open to learning from youth with disabilities and their families.
- Everyone involved in transition can learn something new from others.
- Life-long learning is necessary, healthy and desirable.
- Planning for learning experiences together leads to outcomes that meet the learners' needs.
- Use what works; don't reinvent the wheel.
- Learning must be accessible to all, regardless of disability.

Competencies and Skills for Transition Specialists

A study of central competencies for transition specialists by Defur and Tavymans (1995, Sept.) was mentioned in an earlier chapter. It is worth repeating here because it compared competencies across disciplines; VR, vocational education, and special education. The following seven competencies emerged as central to the role of transition specialists, regardless of position:

- Knowledge of agencies and systems change;
- Development and management of transition goals of the IEP;
- Working with others in the transition process;
- Vocational assessment and job development;
- Professionalism, advocacy, and legal issues;
- Job training and support; and
- General assessment.

Again, these skills are required in the fields of special education, vocational education, and VR. They will facilitate the interdisciplinary framework needed to support the successful transition of students with disabilities from school to successful careers. While some of the information needed in this skill set is technical, “soft skills” may be the competencies that assure success. Facts about agencies, laws, and assessment information must be accurate, of course, but skill in “working with others in the transition process” may be tougher to get right.

In many ways professionals in transition programs serve as consultants to each other as well as to the youth and family. For those whose roles have been designated as “teacher” or “VR counselor,” the thought of serving as a consultant might seem strange and uncomfortable. In reality, the goals of a consultant are closely aligned with those of a teacher or counselor.

Consider these:

- To help others succeed.
- To share and apply your expertise.
- To build commitment and ownership to solutions.
- To solve problems so they stay solved.

Consulting skills are a blend of technical and relationship skills (Block, 1981). The best

special educators and VR counselors know that consulting is one of their primary functions. Materials for training to improve skills in consulting are included in Appendix E.

Helpful Learning for Youth with Disabilities and Their Families

Consumers and their families may require support and training to assume their roles as full partners in communication and planning. Students' roles and responsibilities in the transition process were described in Chapter 3, "The Center of the Community: The Student and Family." The responsibilities that young people must begin to accept are heavy, and without support could be too difficult. A list of skills necessary to lead the transition process could include self-awareness, disability awareness, communication, self-determination and self-advocacy. Fortunately, curricula, learning experiences and resources exist to teach young people with disabilities skills to become more empowered.

Youth development has been defined as a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models that focus solely on youth problems (National Youth Development Information Center, 1998). Partners in collaborative efforts may best reach training and technical assistance goals by employing tools from youth development models.

Most learners need opportunities to practice new skills. Providing information or techniques is not enough to assure mastery of competencies. Youth with disabilities must participate with peers, families and professionals in conferences, meetings, and other activities that encourage them to practice communication skills and self-determination strategies. Opportunities for leadership in the school and community provide an excellent training ground for adult roles. Interaction with mentors and role models may provide still another learning strategy.

Teaching self-determination and self-advocacy skills can become the driving force behind the success of a student's transition. The areas most often included in self-determination training are:

- Choice making,
- Decision making,
- Problem solving,
- Self-evaluation skills,
- Goal setting,
- Predicting outcomes, and
- Adapting to different environments. (Morningstar & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 1999, May).

With skill development and practice in these areas, young people with disabilities can become competent leaders of their transition.

Family Training

A survey was conducted by the Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights

(PACER) Center's Technical Assistance on Transition and the Rehabilitation Act (TATRA) program that included a training needs assessment for families. Results of the survey indicated the need for training and technical assistance in the following areas:

- Juvenile justice,
- Graduation standards and youth with disabilities,
- Transition needs of students at age 14,
- Best practices in school-to-work,
- Promoting change in transition and VR systems,
- Information on the VR system,
- Helping youth develop self-advocacy skills,
- IDEA legislation that addresses the "transfer of student rights at age of majority,"
- Post-secondary programs for students with cognitive disabilities,
- Combining resources from various programs (i.e. Workforce, Medicaid, VR, Education, and Social Security), and
- Balance of academic curriculum with functional life-skills. (TATRA Needs Assessment, 2001, April).

In addition to these survey-identified areas, training for parents may cover skills for effective communication with their child and parent advocacy skills. Training in all of these areas can assist parents to guide young people in choice making.

Strategies to promote empowerment were discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. The discussions of roles in those chapters provided recommendations to strengthen each of the transition partners' capacity, thereby building the community of support through behaviors and attitudes expressed in day-to-day interactions. The recommended strategies may not be considered formal training, but foster learning by example and through the informal exchange of ideas.

Learning Modalities and Training Methods

Training for all transition team members can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Some of the factors that influence the choice of strategies include the goals of the training, target audience, available resources, including time, and the needs and preferences of the learner. Keeping in mind the guiding principles for learning together mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, decisions should favor the most accessible, inclusive alternatives.

Self-paced study

Professional magazines, journals and books are traditional sources for individual learning and professional growth. Publications offered for youth with disabilities and their parents may offer interesting perspectives for professionals as well.

The Internet, with a plethora of web sites, may provide endless individual development opportunities for all transition team partners. On-line self-determination training is offered by People First organizations across the country. Tremendous volumes of resources exist on-line for developing cross-training materials and workshops.

Distance education technology provides opportunity for broad-based cross-training

to reach diverse geographic and partner audiences. Collaborating with institutions of higher education in this regard affords opportunities for interactive TV, satellite broadcasts and other technologies.

The following chapter, *Resources for the Transition Community*, lists on-line and distance learning opportunities for youth with disabilities, their families and professionals in transition.

Face-to-face

Bringing people together for learning serves a number of purposes. As mentioned previously, relationship building is equally as important as technical training content. Face to face group training provides opportunities for peers to learn formally and informally while getting to know each other as people. One-on-one learning provides for ongoing evaluation and feedback, coaching and individual encouragement. At the other end of the spectrum, conferences provide a forum for creating energy and enthusiasm for shared vision and goals.

▶ **FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Models for Designing Transition Conferences**

There have been a growing number of statewide conferences and learning experiences in transition. The best models include a focus on services to all partners, professional development, and engagement of partners in the planning process. One example is the Ohio Transition Weekend, where Deaf students and their families learn together about paths to successful post-school outcomes. (Meredith Crane, Deaf Initiatives, TheDEAFund@aol.com) Other models for Transition Conferences include Pennsylvania's Transition Conference, (Joan Kester, joakester@state.pa.us); Delaware's Summer Institute, and Virginia's Transition Forum that focuses on professional development and team building.

Lifelong Learning, Academic Credit and Continuing Education

Achievement in formal education is generally rewarded with some form of acknowledgment from units toward a high school diploma or equivalency to post secondary and graduate level credits. From transition specialists who have already attained advanced degrees to young students in process of matriculation, efforts in this process of learning together may offer more than intrinsic value. Keep in mind the need for academic or continuing education credits when planning cross-disciplinary training for the entire transition community. Professionals may seek credits toward maintaining certification. Youth with disabilities may receive high school credit or leadership/achievement awards that contribute toward post-secondary goals.

One such program was developed at Holt High School in Holt, Michigan, (Jorgenson, 1998). A class was developed for special education students that focused on learning style awareness and best performance conditions, self-advocacy skills development, and empowerment to assume responsibility for learning. The elective class was so well received that it was adopted by Holt High School as a general curriculum offering open to all students.

College degree programs, continuing education programs and in-service programs provide opportunities throughout professional life to develop awareness, common values and vision, as well as the seeds of team formation and collaboration so essential to transition services. Diversity in experience, expertise, culture and other factors provides richness to the

professional development experience that can only enhance skill development.

▶ **FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Lifelong Learning**

Iowa Area Education Agency Project (Northeast Iowa)

Model based on need to: connect student to their community, connect student behaviors to adult success and connect curriculum to career ladders. IEP teams must assist students by infusing available relevant curriculum in their schedule to support their vision statement. Infusing coursework to support the transition vision is critical to the process and ultimately allows for the narrowing down of the vision to be accurate and realistic by graduation. The Career/Coursework Ladder is an attempt to depict the relationship between high school curriculum and life based experiences required to graduate competent young adults.

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Resources for Training

Training resources are many and varied. A few will be described broadly in this chapter with specific resource information provided in detail in the following chapter entitled *Resources for the Transition Community*.

Department of Education

The U. S. Department of Education, OSERS, provides resources for training all members of the transition team. The laws that provide the basis for special education and the State-Federal VR program both require Comprehensive Systems of Personnel Development (CSPD). These provisions in IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act assure that State and local agencies address the needs for qualified professional personnel. In addition, both Acts require cross training specific to transition of youth with disabilities. Dollars allocated for services to groups of individuals with disabilities and in-service training of professionals may be used in providing such training.

There are a number of projects designed specifically by OSERS to support parent partnerships. The mission of the Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER) is to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and their families, based on the concept of parents helping parents. A national network of Parent Information Centers is available to pursue the mission of PACER and support parents of students with disabilities. More information on PACER can be found on their website, located at <http://www.pacer.org/about.htm>

In 1994 RSA funded a technical assistance project known as "Technical Assistance on Transition and the Rehabilitation Act" (TATRA). There are currently seven TATRA projects nationwide that inform individuals with disabilities and their families about VR and independent living services, to enable them to improve and expand employment goals and outcomes. These projects help individuals, as well as the parent, family members, guardians, advocates, or other authorized representatives of the individuals, learn to participate more effectively with professionals in meeting the vocational and rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities. For resources provided by TATRA, visit their website at <http://www.pacer.org/tatra/tatra.htm>.

The Technical Assistance Center for Professional Development Partnerships (<http://www.dssc.org/pdp/>) is committed to facilitating and supporting the development of collaborative partnerships for the preparation of educators. This web site contains a vast array of resources about organizations, publications, conferences and web sites related to the professional development of educators, as well as links to the five Professional Development Partnership (PDP) Projects nationwide, funded by OSEP.

RSA provides funding for cooperative agreements with 21 universities across the country for Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Programs (RRCEPs). These programs are charged with the provision of training and technical assistance for human resource and organization development in state VR agencies and community rehabilitation programs. Located within each of the Department of Education's ten Federal regions, the RRCEPs can assist with training at State and local, as well as regional levels. Contact information is included in the next chapter.

Department of Labor

The Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration offers many training and technical assistance resources to support effective youth development strategies for ALL youth with disabilities. DOL also offers technical assistance to enhance employment services specifically for youth with disabilities.

Youth Leadership Forums (YLF) for youth with disabilities are funded by the Department of Labor through state Governors' Councils on Disability. YLF are state level conferences, bringing together students with disabilities to meet adult role models and explore issues of disability and self-advocacy. They also provide a learning forum for youth with disabilities about government processes. Developing a local or state YLF would expand leadership and empowerment training opportunities for youth with disabilities, and transition teams are encouraged to use this federal model and available resources at <http://www.dol.gov/odep/programs/youth.htm>. The transition team members in your state or local area could develop a YLF as a joint initiative.

A movement is quickly spreading across America coined, "YoPowerment" for Youth Empowerment. It springs from projects funded by DOL Youth Opportunity Grants (http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services/yog.asp) designed to increase the chances for school completion, success in employment and independence of disadvantaged youth. The projects are based in local communities that meet certain requirements and take many, varied forms but all are based on principles of youth development and afford opportunities for growth and leadership. The DOL Youth Opportunity Grant web site (http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services/yog.asp) provides excellent resources that should be used by local and state transition teams to expand empowerment strategies and programs for youth with disabilities. Peer-to-Peer Workshops are part of the ongoing technical assistance that the Office of Youth Services (OYS) provides for the Youth Opportunity Grant programs (http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services/peertopeer_desc.asp).

At the time this document was written, the Workforce Investment Act required local Youth Councils to develop local employment and training policies based on a youth development perspective, and to establish linkages with business/employers, community-based youth-serving organizations as well as juvenile justice officials, public housing authorities, parents of eligible youth, and former job training participants. This structure clearly indicates the need for developing partnerships throughout a local community to

provide adequate policies, services, and training to youth with disabilities. The community transition teams or councils should be effectively linked with the Youth Council. Considering the many needs of youth, there is no one agency or entity that can adequately fulfill each of those needs. Creating partnerships may be the only effective way to provide comprehensive services, training and technical assistance.

In July 2002 a new publication was issued by DOL entitled The Youth Council Toolkit: Tools to help youth councils build effective operational youth delivery systems, which can be used as a training tool in forming effective local transition teams and strong youth development strategies. This publication is located at http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services/toolkit_2002.asp.

The WIA anticipated that the Youth Councils would promote a shared vision for all youth with disabilities to achieve successful careers. Based upon the youth development framework, Youth Councils strive for characteristics of a system to include a shared vision, coordinated outreach and intake, service strategy development, locked-in services, and follow-up. Another helpful training tool is entitled Recipes for Success: Youth Council Guide to Creating a Youth Development System under WIA (<http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/resources/pdf/recipes-ycouncil.pdf>).

Consumer Organizations

Previously discussed in Chapter 4, "The Transition Community," consumer organizations can be a critical source of training and technical assistance. Consumer organizations may be cross disability or disability specific; politically involved or focused on social interaction and support; international or local. In other words, the services they offer will vary greatly depending on the particular consumer group. Many such organizations provide awareness of specific disability issues, affording young people, their families and the professionals they work with, the opportunity to learn more about disabilities from individuals who have lived longer with similar concerns. Some organizations have State and local chapters that meet frequently affording both informal and formal learning opportunities. Many consumer groups have national conferences, seminars and workshops. Some have member publications that provide current information of interest to people with disabilities. Professionals must be aware of the rich resources consumer organizations have to offer for their learning as well as for the development of the consumer. Please see the section of Chapter 8 focused on consumer organizations for specifics.

Professional Organizations

Like consumer organizations, professional associations come in all shapes and sizes. Most provide learning opportunities for members. Again, it is important to reinforce cross training of professionals from the transition community and to include youth with disabilities and their families in the same learning opportunities available to professionals.

Of particular interest to members of the transition community is the Council for Exceptional Children and its Division on Career Development and Transition (<http://www.dcdt.org/>). The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (<http://www.ncset.org/>) offers training and technical assistance to the public as well as to its members. Additional professional organizations are listed in the *Resources* chapter.

Use of the 28th IRI Document: A Training Tool and Framework for Collaboration

The intent of the 28th IRI is to improve the successful outcomes of youth with disabilities by addressing systemic issues between the VR system, education system and other systems mandated to provide transition services. This publication provides strategies to increase opportunities for the empowerment and choice of youth with disabilities, and emphasizes the critical role of parents as equal partners in transition planning. The increased knowledge of legislative requirements along with information about research-based effective practices, will increase collaboration between transition partners, and enhance career outcomes of youth with disabilities.

This document provides a collaborative transition framework that can assist Federal, State, and local policymakers in establishing legislation (e.g. reauthorization), funding priorities, policies, and program guidelines to promote a seamless system of transition services.

For the greatest commitment to training outcomes, the transition community as a whole must be involved in planning joint training, determining common goals and following the guiding principles listed at the beginning of this chapter. This means that educators, agency staff, parents, and students are involved in every step of the process.

The chapters of the 28th IRI can be used separately as self-standing training tools or as a whole by the transition community and policymakers in order to promote positive change in transition practices. The content of each chapter is identified below:

- **Chapter 1, *Eye on the Sky: Broadening our Horizons***, can be used as a tool to assist policymakers and potential transition team partners at a Federal, State, and local level to understand a common vision for the successful transition of youth to productive careers. It provides the foundation for the journey from compliance to commitment.
- **Chapter 2, *Grounding our Journey: Compliance with the Law***, provides extensive information about legislation affecting transition initiatives, along with quick reference guides on relevant legislation. This information can be used as a training tool and reference guide to understand the requirements of legislation, which gives the reader a solid groundwork for effective practice.
- **Chapter 3, *The Center of the Community: The Student and Family***, describes the critical roles of youth and their families. There are many helpful how-to lists leading transition team partners to employ empowerment strategies.
- **Chapter 4, *Meeting the Community Partners***, introduces the reader to those involved in supporting the successful transition of youth with disabilities to successful post-school outcomes. The chapter suggests roles and responsibilities needed to build Federal, State, and local transition communities.
- **Chapter 5, *Community Collaboration***, identifies the key elements critical to building a collaborative transition community, and suggests ways to make collaboration work at a State and local level. Management and direct service perspectives are presented.
- **Chapter 6, *Realizing the Vision: Creating the Path and Traveling Together***, moves from transition theories and concepts to practice, describing strategies to mobilize effective transition practices at a local level.

- **Chapter 7, *Learning as a Community: Training and Technical Assistance***, establishes the guiding principles – training and technical assistance endeavors must be jointly planned, developed, and implemented by all members of the transition community. This includes educators, agency staff, parents, and students!
- **Chapter 8, *Resources for the Transition Community***, provides extensive transition resources and reference materials to facilitate movement from a practice of compliance to commitment.
- **Inserts** throughout the document highlight promising and effective practices. These examples entitled “► From Compliance to Commitment”, demonstrate how the information presented in each chapter can apply to real-life. Contact information is provided to encourage readers to get in touch with others who have experiences to share.
- **Take Action Today** is presented at the conclusion of many chapters to help the reader recognize the actions that can be taken now to enhance transition practices.

The writers of “Investing in the Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Productive Careers,” invite you to share our vision and put this document to good use:
Empowered youth with disabilities access the community of their choice to achieve their desired careers, life-long learning and a rich quality of life.