

Information *Brief*

Addressing Trends and Developments in Secondary Education
and Transition



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Professional Development for Transition Personnel: Current Issues and Strategies for Success

By Mary E. Morningstar and Jeannie Kleinhammer-Tramill

Introduction

After more than two decades of federal transition legislation, students with disabilities continue to have significantly poorer postschool outcomes as compared to their peers without disabilities. One reason for these outcomes is that educators are inadequately prepared to provide the services required under the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) (Anderson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Morningstar, et al., 2003). The issues and challenges of providing coordinated transition services are complex and pressing, yet few special education personnel preparation programs include even one course devoted to transition (Anderson, et al., 2003). Furthermore, state departments of education often identify that primary training takes place on-the-job rather than through comprehensive professional development (Kochhar-Bryant, 2003). Consequently, state departments of education have targeted transition professional development as a priority for special education improvement grants and statewide planning (Kochhar-Bryant, 2003; Storms & Sullivan, 2000). Unfortunately, transition professional development is often hampered by a lack of clear policies as well as limited systems for planning, delivery, and evaluation.

Because schools rely heavily on special education teachers to implement and manage transition planning and services, it is disconcerting that teachers feel unprepared in those areas (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). In a national leadership summit on improving results for youth with disabilities, more than 250 agency leaders, policy-makers, educators, parents, and youth with disabilities identified *professional development for transition* as one of the *highest priorities* for states (National Center for Secondary Education and Transition, 2004).

Professional development is defined as a comprehensive system of training and technical assistance (e.g., in-service training, mentoring systems, online courses, etc.). A critical feature of effective professional development systems is to tie pre-service training to ongoing in-service activities. Comprehensive systems of transition professional development focus on developing collaborative relationships among state and local educational agencies, other state agencies, service providers, and higher education. This brief will provide an overview of critical issues related to transition professional development and highlight current models of improving results for youth by supporting practitioners with pre-service and in-service training.

Complex Role Demands of Secondary Special Educators

The 2004 Amendments to IDEA reflect a significant step toward a vision of special education that emphasizes successful postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. Today's secondary educators must be prepared to provide culturally competent services promoting student access to challenging standards and opportunities linking academic learning to social and work experiences leading to successful adult outcomes. Unfortunately, secondary special educators feel poorly prepared to address the majority of their students' transition needs (deFur & Taymans, 1995; Prater, Sileo, & Black, 2000). Teachers have reported a general understanding of transition problems, issues, and legal mandates yet they note little understanding of and experience with interagency and adult services or how best to support families (Knott & Asselin, 1999). More importantly, only those teachers who perceived that they had a significant transition knowledge base were likely to implement effective transition-related activities with their students. Blanchett (2001) found similar results; almost half of the secondary special education teachers surveyed reported being unprepared to meet their students' transition needs.

Teachers want pre-service and in-service training to focus less on philosophical, historical, and legal foundations of transition and more on communication and interagency collaboration (Knott & Asselin, 1999). Teachers surveyed by Knott and Asselin (1999) said that training should move beyond "What is transition planning?" to "How do I accomplish planning that will lead to successful transitions?" (p. 3). The role of secondary special educators has shifted from involving traditional, school-based service provision to requiring coordination among all stakeholders during the transition process (deFur & Taymans, 1995; Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Lattin, 1999). Some speculate that practitioners fail to collaborate effectively during transition due to misperceptions, negative attitudes, and lack of training for such new roles (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

Limited Transition Pre-Service Training

Recent findings from a national survey of special education personnel preparation programs in the United States revealed that less than 50% of the training that teachers receive in higher education currently address transition standards (Anderson et al., 2003). In addition, 45% of all programs surveyed indicated offering a stand-alone course devoted to transition. While 70% of the instructors reported infusing transition content into other courses, they indicated that they devoted less time to transition competencies when using this method for con-

tent delivery. These findings are consistent with earlier research conclusions that embedding transition content into existing courses does not allow for adequate emphasis or coverage of important transition content (Severson, Hoover, & Wheeler, 1994).

Despite the availability of national standards for preparation of transition specialists (Division on Career Development and Transition, 2000), most states' teacher licensure or certification policies do not make provisions for transition personnel (Kleinhammer-Tramill, Gieger, & Morningstar, 2003). Moreover, state policies may not include any transition-specific standards within general special education licensure. An estimated 30% of states show no evidence of transition-relevant standards or courses (Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2003). Given these findings, it is possible that state credentialing systems have significantly influenced the amount and intensity of higher education professional development and training. But states that offer transition specializations, certifications, pre-service training, and graduate programs were more likely to meet national standards for transition personnel preparation (Anderson et al., 2003).

The methods in which transition training programs were established in the past are rapidly disappearing, partly as a result of decreasing federal funding for transition personnel preparation (Kleinhammer-Tramill, Baker, Tramill, & Fiore, 2003). The current trend toward collapsing state special education certification to fewer and broader areas is also a factor. Another factor that supports or impedes transition personnel preparation programs is higher education institutional commitment to faculty specialization. Long-standing transition pre-service programs illustrate the importance of both federal and institutional support for professional training for transition personnel (Morningstar & Clark, 2003).

What Transition Professionals Need to Know

Over the past decade, researchers have investigated transition practices that improve postschool outcomes of students with disabilities. Consensus exists that secondary special education and transition professionals need instructional content (Blalock et al., 2003; DCDT, 2000). Morningstar and Clark (2003) describe five areas critical to any program offering transition personnel development:

1. *Knowledge of principles and basic concepts of transition education and service*—knowledge and application of transition services requirements under IDEA as well as emerging and recommended practices focusing on transition planning and the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

2. *Knowledge of models of transition education and services*—knowledge of specific program models that focus on individualized planning and align with general secondary education, including models of student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, and interagency collaboration, as described by leaders in the field (Blalock et al., 2003; DCDT, 2000).
3. *Skills in using strategies for developing, organizing, and implementing transition education and services*—skills needed to implement effective models of transition, as well as transition assessment, service coordination, and curriculum planning within the context of general and special transition instructional programs.
4. *Knowledge and use of collaboration competencies*—competence in service coordination with the complex array of agencies, programs, and services supporting young adults with disabilities.
5. *Knowledge and skills to address systemic problems in transition services delivery*—capacity to understand and address barriers and strategies for planning, developing, implementing, and promoting transition services and programs at local, state, and federal levels. The focus is at the programmatic structural and systems level (Kohler, 1998).

These five areas are consistent with research in the field regarding effective practices toward positive postschool outcomes (Kohler, 1998). In addition, they reflect critical transition training needs identified across multiple states (Lattin, Dove, Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Frey, 2004). The recommendations of transition practitioners should be adopted (Knott & Asselin, 1999) and training content should focus on the “how to” and not just the “what is.”

Strategies and Resources for Improving Professional Development

Addressing the issues and challenges described above requires innovative responses such as acquisition of funding for pre-service training, delivery of online professional development, and establishment of Communities of Practice. The following are examples of each of these strategies.

1. **Pre-service Grant Opportunities.** Each year the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/oseppre/index.html>), makes available grants to support the preparation of personnel in special education and related services, and early intervention to work with students with disabilities. These grants aim to ensure that personnel have the required skills and knowledge derived from practices that have been proven successful through research and experience.
2. **Noninstructor-Led Online Training Modules.** For the past three years, the University of Kansas (KU) Transition Coalition (<http://www.transitioncoalition.org>) has been developing and evaluating online training for transition professionals. These noninstructor-led online training modules include three sessions of information requiring approximately three hours to complete. Preliminary data indicates that while the majority of the users (75% from 21 states) had never taken online training previously, 92% said the online modules helped them to develop an understanding of the topic. A significant number also indicated that the coalition’s online training format is an effective way to offer in-service training (83%). In addition, pre-post testing shows that knowledge of content improved significantly upon completing the training module (Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Lattin, & Tiemann, 2003).
3. **Instructor-Led Online Courses.** The University of Kansas (KU) also offers instructional content units consisting of readings, interactive lectures, online discussions, weekly individual and group assignments and projects, and student evaluations. These courses use an asynchronous delivery method, meaning that students can access the content, activities, and discussions when it best fits their schedule. The four transition courses offered by KU follow a similar format and structure, allowing students to become familiar with and anticipate the learning environment they will be utilizing. Courses run on a semester schedule, and content is organized into weekly class sessions. During this time, students are required to complete class activities, but they control when they perform tasks in the time-frame that is available. Students create a repository of work in online portfolios. They can use these to reflect on their growth as well as to offer models and illustrations to peers and colleagues.
4. **Communities of Practice: Pennsylvania Secondary Transition Initiative.** In 1999, with the development of Pennsylvania’s IDEA Memorandum of Understanding (IDEA-MOU), a statewide cross-systems planning and professional development effort was launched (Allar

et al., 2004). This forum for addressing major transition-related systems issues has since emerged into a Community of Practice (CoP). “Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.4). The Pennsylvania CoP promotes a shared vision for the successful outcomes of youth. As a statewide cross-agency team, it is able to develop and implement cross-system strategies to support and strengthen local transition councils and teams to function using the model at the local level. The overarching framework for the Pennsylvania CoP focuses on shared responsibility for increasing youth and adult outcomes through four strategies: 1) strategic planning and shared agendas; 2) using youth and adult outcomes data to inform decision-making; 3) capacity building through sharing of expertise and combining training and technical assistance programs; and 4) aligning policies and practices among all state and local systems (Allar et al., 2004). Since the first series of meetings and trainings, the Pennsylvania CoP has gained visibility and momentum by offering ongoing training and technical assistance across multiple agencies.

Conclusions

Professional development for transition personnel can take many shapes and forms. What is critical is that the content for training is research-based and reflects current knowledge of effective practices; that there are multiple opportunities for collaboration at the state, local, and individual practitioner levels; that effective practices for professional development include concepts of Communities of Practice as exemplified by the Pennsylvania CoP; and that a seamless system of professional development is established that is initiated at the pre-service level and continues throughout all in-service training.

Mary E. Morningstar, Ph.D., and Jeannie Kleinhammer-Tramill, Ph.D., are both with the Department of Special Education, University of Kansas.

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Resources

Transition Coalition

<http://www.transitioncoalition.org/>

Pennsylvania Communities of Practice for Transition

Click on “Transition”

<http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/>

NCSET Web Topic on Professional Development

<http://www.ncset.org/topics/profdevelopment/default.asp?topic=15>



**National Center on Secondary
Education and Transition**
Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD)
University of Minnesota
6 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

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**National Center on Secondary
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Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD),
University of Minnesota, 6 Pattee Hall,
150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455
Tel: 612.624.2097; Fax: 612.624.9344;
Web: <http://www.ncset.org>;
E-mail: ncset@umn.edu

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