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Challenges to Providing Secondary Education and Transition Services for Youth with Disabilities

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BEGINNING IN THE MID-1980s, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has emphasized the importance of improving transition services nationally. The Federal Government has assumed a crucial role in stimulating State and local efforts to improve transition services through a variety of policy, research, model demonstration, and technical assistance efforts. Specific language on transition was included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997. From this Federal legislation, regulations were established requiring State and local educational agencies specifically to address the school and post-school transition service needs of students with disabilities. These needs would be met through interagency agreements and coordinated planning among special education staff, parents, students, regular education, and public service agencies.

With the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, significant new requirements were put into place to ensure students greater access to the general curriculum and state and districtwide assessment programs. The IDEA Amendments of 1997 also expanded previous transition requirements by requiring that the individualized education program (IEP) include, at age 14 or earlier, a statement of transition service needs that focus on the student's courses of study (such as participation in advanced placement courses or vocational education programs). The IEP must also include, beginning at age 16 or younger, a statement of needed transition services and interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages.

The current challenge is to integrate and align these transition requirements with other IDEA requirements that give students with disabilities greater access to the general curriculum and statewide and districtwide assessment programs. Several recent studies indicate that the implementation of transition service requirements has been too slow, with many States failing to achieve minimal levels of compliance (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStafano, 1999; Johnson & Sharpe, 2000; National Council on Disability, 2000). Areas of greatest noncompliance include having appropriate participants in IEP meetings, providing adequate notice of meetings, and providing a statement of needed services in students' IEPs. These problems have been complicated further by State and local standards-based assessment systems that either fail to include students with disabilities or provide inadequate accommodations that support their participation.

Students with disabilities also experience difficulties in meeting State and local graduation requirements, and concerns are mounting about the relationship between students' academic experiences and the development of post-school transition plans that address how students will access postsecondary education, employment, and community living opportunities (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999; Johnson, Sharpe, & Stodden, 2000; Policy Information Clearinghouse, 1997; Stodden & Dowitch, 2000a). Limited levels of service coordination and collaboration among schools and local service agencies create difficulties for students with disabilities and families in accessing post-school education or work results. Strategies are desperately needed to help State and local educational agencies and community service agencies address the transition requirements as students access the general curriculum and meet State standards and graduation requirements. This module will discuss the challenges involved in providing services to this population and some strategies for meeting those challenges.

Challenges Affecting Secondary Education and Transition Services

Challenge 1: Ensure Students With Disabilities Access to the Full Range of Curricular Options and Learning Experiences

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 provide many students with disabilities new opportunities to participate in and benefit from a wide array of general courses and learning experiences. A major goal of accessing the general curriculum is to prepare students to earn a standard diploma and help prepare them for adult life (Policy Information Clearinghouse, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Although the general curriculum contains both academic (e.g., math, science) and nonacademic (e.g., career education, arts, citizenship) domains, student performance is assessed primarily in academics. As a result, it is not uncommon for portions of the general curriculum, as well as transition goals, to receive limited or no attention (Hasazi et al., 1999; Warren, 1997).

Efforts must be undertaken to ensure that students with disabilities remain on a full "curriculum" track with learning expectations that guide the instruction of regular education students. IEP teams must work to ensure that high expectations are maintained and students are afforded opportunities to develop skills through a wide range of curricular options, including vocational education, service learning, community work experience, and adult living skills (Hasazi, et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2000). Therefore, secondary education and transition are also needed that integrate academic, career, work-based, service learning, and other learning experiences.

Access to the general curriculum requires more than common standards, the integration of academic and applied learning, and universal design (Note 1). It also depends on other factors, such as the knowledge and skill levels of educators (Boudah, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1997; Carnine, 1995; Kameenui & Carnine, 1994; Tralli, Colombo, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1999), use of appropriate accommodations during instruction and testing (Elliott & Thurlow, 2000; Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 1998; Thurlow, House, Boys, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 2000), collaboration between regular education and special education personnel in designing educational programs for students with disabilities (Knight, 1998; Lenz & Scanlon, 1998), and the support and vision of educational leadership.

There is also a critical need to develop assessment, curriculum, and instructional strategies that are relevant to all students (including those who have significant learning needs), allowing them to successfully achieve skills through vocational

Note 1. In terms of learning, universal design means the design of instructional materials and activities that allows the learning goals to be attainable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities. This means, for example, that a curriculum should include instructional and assessment alternatives to make it accessible and appropriate for individuals with diverse learning styles and abilities (Access to the General Education Curriculum, www.cast.org/nac).

education, training in adult living skills, and community participation. Strategies such as universal design offer another approach to ensuring that students with disabilities access the full range of learning opportunities in the secondary education curriculum (Jorgensen, 1997; Orkis & McLane, 1998; Rose & Meyer, 1996).

To ensure that students with disabilities access the full range of general curricular options and learning experiences, there is a need to:

* Promote high expectations for student achievement and learning. High expectations must be maintained for students with disabilities across the full range of academic and nonacademic courses and programs available within middle schools and high schools nationally. This is consistent with the Bush Administration's blueprint for education reform, No Child Left Behind, that makes schools accountable for ensuring that all students meet high academic standards. In order to maintain high academic standards, instructional strategies that promote differential teaching, universal design, integrated academic and applied learning, and other practices will need to be broadly adopted.

* Make systematic and appropriate use of assessment and instructional accommodations. Regular education and special education teachers need information and skills on how to appropriately use accommodations in assessment and instructional situations. Improved teacher preparation at the preservice and continuing education levels, promotion of collaborative teaching models, and other strategies are needed to address this issue. State and local agencies are also grappling with inconsistent policies, procedures, and practices on the use of accommodations. Consequently, accommodations are many times viewed as unacceptable in meeting State or local district testing conditions, often over-used in the hope of "boosting" student performance, and commonly considered too expensive and difficult to implement. The latter factor often results in students' not receiving appropriate accommodations.

* Ensure that students have access to the full range of secondary education curricula and programs. Students' IEPs must focus on the broadest range of curriculum and programs that support students with disabilities in successfully meeting State academic and related standards, as well as developing essential adult skills. In addition to the academic focus of the general curriculum, high school curricular options must also include community-based work experience, vocational education, dropout prevention and re-entry programs, independent living skills programs, Tech Prep programs, and service learning opportunities.

Challenge 2: Make High School Graduation Decisions Based on Meaningful Indicators of Students' Learning and Skills, and Clarify the Implications of Different Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

Requirements that States set for graduation can range from Carnegie unit requirements (a certain number of course credits earned in specific areas), successfully passing a competency test, high school exit exams, or a series of benchmark exams (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995). States may also require a combination of these. Diversity in graduation requirements is complicated further by an increasingly diverse set of possible diploma options within individual States. In addition to the standard high school diploma, some States offer special education diplomas, certificates of completion, occupational diplomas, and others.

Many States have implemented multiple strategies to improve the passing rates of students with disabilities on State exit exams and in meeting other requirements for graduation. Strategies have included grade-level retention; providing special instruction during the school day, after school, on weekends, and during the summer; and supporting teachers in using a variety of instructional strategies.

State and local educational agencies also need to examine the implications of developing and granting alternative diploma options for students with disabilities. The question here is whether receiving less than a standard high school diploma may limit a student's access to future postsecondary education and employment opportunities. Currently most States offer and grant alternative diplomas in addition to the standard high school diploma (Guy et al., 1999). State and local educational agencies need to thoroughly discuss the "meaning" and "rigor" of these alternative diplomas with, at a minimum, post-secondary education program representatives and employers. Consensus must be reached on their use for postsecondary education admissions and in making hiring decisions.

Challenge 3: Ensure Students Access To and Full Participation in Postsecondary Education, Employment, and Independent Living Opportunities

Young adults with disabilities still face significant difficulties in securing jobs, accessing postsecondary education, living independently, and fully participating in their communities. With the passage of recent Federal legislation (Americans with Disabilities Act [P.L. 101-336] and the IDEA Amendments of 1997 [P.L. 105-17]) has come an expanding social awareness of accessibility and disability issues surrounding youth with disabilities seeking access to postsecondary education, lifelong learning, and employment (Benz, Doren, & Yovanoff, 1998; Horn & Berktold, 1999).

The National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports (NCSPEs), a Rehabilitation Research and Training Center funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, U.S. Department of Education, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has conducted an extensive program of research focused upon the access, participation, and success of

youth with disabilities in postsecondary education and subsequent employment. Based on this research, NCSPEs has framed issues concerning students with disabilities and postsecondary education within the following four areas of intervention:

1. Include opportunities for students to understand themselves and their disability in relation to needed services and supports, with a focus on advocating for those needs in different post-school, educational and employment settings (NCSPEs, 2000a);
2. Develop effective models of assistance and support that are personally responsive, flexible, and individualized, as well as coordinated with instruction and integrated with the overall life support needs of the student (NCSPEs, 2000a);
3. Coordinate and manage postsecondary education supports and services with those provided by other community service agencies (health, mental health, human services, transportation, others) required by many students with disabilities to successfully participate in and complete their postsecondary education programs (NCSPEs, 2000a; Stodden & Dowrick, 200b); and
4. Ensure that the educational supports required by student during their postsecondary education program experiences transfer to eventual employment settings (NCSPEs, 2000a; Thomas, 2000).

Another pressing societal challenge concerns the overall unemployment rate among adults with disabilities in the United States. Although employment has improved somewhat over the past 14-year period for people who say they are able to work, employment is still an area with the widest gulf between all people with disabilities and the rest of the population. Currently, only 32 percent of persons with disabilities, ages 18-64, work full-time or part-time, compared to 81 percent of the nondisabled population -- a 49 percent gap (National Organization on Disabilities, 2000). Further results from this study also note that employment prospects for 18 to 29 year-olds are the most promising. Among this cohort, 50 percent of those with disabilities who are able to work are working, compared to 72 percent of their nondisabled counterparts.

It is well understood that preparation for the transition from high school to postsecondary education, employment, and independent living must begin early, or at least by age 14. It is at this age that students' IEP teams must engage in discussions regarding the types of coursework students will need, to the extent appropriate for each individual student, to be able to enroll in postsecondary education programs; the types of learning options and experiences students will need to develop basic work skills for employment; and the skills students will need for independent living.

Specific types and levels of accommodations and supports a student will need to overcome barriers to participation in these post-school environments must also be identified. President Bush's *New Freedom Initiative* is intended to help Americans with disabilities by increasing their access to assistive and universally designed technologies that remove barriers to participation in postsecondary education, employment, and community life. Increased access to assistive technologies, funding for low-interest loan programs to purchase these technologies, and better

coordination among agencies in prioritizing the immediate needs of young adults with disabilities for assistive technology needs in communities nationwide are part of this initiative.

Prior to the student's graduation from high school, it is the responsibility of the student's IEP team to identify and engage the responsible agencies, resources, and accommodations required for the student to successfully achieve positive adult life outcomes. State vocational rehabilitation programs have, for example, served as a major resource in the preparation of some transition-age youth for employment. A recent longitudinal study of State vocational rehabilitation programs reported that transition-age youth currently represent 13.5 percent of all vocational rehabilitation clients, or approximately 135,931 persons nationally (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2000). This study also reported that receipt of specific vocational rehabilitation services, including education or training services, physical or mental restoration services, and diagnostic or evaluation services, were strongly associated with achieving a positive employment outcome and with entering competitive employment. Overall, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of transition-age youth who were vocational rehabilitation clients achieved an employment outcome as a result of the services they received (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2000). Prior to a student's graduation from high school, all agencies responsible need to:

* Ensure that community service agency participation systematically occurs in the development of post-school transition plans. Strategies such as formalizing agency responsibilities through interagency agreements or memorandums of understanding, and formalizing follow-up procedures and actions when agencies are unable to attend, should be considered.

* Engage in integrated service planning. The IEP should be coordinated with the individualized service plans required under other Federal and State programs (including Title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title XIX of the Social Security Act [Medicaid], Title XVI of the Social Security Act [Supplemental Security Income/SSI], and other Federal programs).

* Provide information to parents and students on essential health and income maintenance programs. Information on the SSI program, including information on basic program eligibility, 18-year-old benefit redeterminations, appeals processes, and use of the SSI work incentives in promoting employment outcomes must be readily accessible to professionals, parents, and students with disabilities.

* Promote collaborative employer engagement. Increased secondary and postsecondary work-based learning opportunities, and ultimately jobs, are predicated on available and willing employers. Vehicles are needed that build on existing cooperative education programs in high schools, such as intermediary linking entities, that convene and connect schools, service agencies, and employers so as to maximize the important learning adjuncts that workplaces represent.

* Establish partnerships with workforce development entities. The participation of youth and young adults with disabilities, family members, and special education and rehabilitation professionals in State and local

workforce development initiatives should be promoted. This is critically important to ensure that initiatives such as the Workforce Investment Act's youth employment programs are fully accessible to individuals with disabilities as they pursue postsecondary education and employment opportunities.

Challenge 4: Support Student and Family Participation

The importance of student participation has been reinforced by emerging practices in public schools emphasizing the core values of self-determination, personal choice, and shared responsibility. OSEP has played a major role in advancing a wide range of self-determination strategies through sponsored research and demonstration projects. A recent national study that surveyed local special education directors and supervisors found that the majority (82 percent) of students over the age of 14 with disabilities frequently or almost always participate in their IEP meetings (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000). This study, however, did not address the question of how well prepared these young people are to participate in and ultimately lead discussions concerning their school and post-school goals.

Parent participation in IEP meetings has been required since the inception of IDEA in 1975. A large part of the discussion in the literature centers around the role of parents as participants in the development of their child's IEP. The IDEA Amendments of 1990 and the 1997 amendments have also required that State and local educational agencies notify parents and encourage their participation when the purpose of the meeting is the consideration of transition services. While existing policies have strongly encouraged parent participation, it is less clear how successful these strategies have been in creating meaningful and valued roles for parents. Because of the critical role that parents play in assisting their children in making the transition from school to adult life, additional attention must be given to establishing strategies and methods needed to actively engage them in discussions and decisions concerning school and post-school options. Special attention is being given to increased funding for effective training and outreach strategies for parents from diverse multicultural backgrounds and those living in poverty. To improve student and parent participation, there is a need to:

* Support students in the development of decision-making, communication, and self-advocacy skills necessary to assume a leadership role in their transition /IEP meetings. Strategies may include offering classes specifically designed to enhance decision-making, efforts to promote self-determination and goal setting throughout the curriculum, and sending information home to assist parents in preparing their child for participation. Students' goals for self-determination must also be clearly stated within IEPs.

* Ensure that parents and students have the information they need to participate in the IEP and transition planning process. Parents also need information on the juvenile justice system, appropriate strategies and programs for serving youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, information on community service programs and their availability, and many other issues.

Challenge 5: Improve Collaboration and System Linkages at All Levels

The effective use of interagency collaboration and cooperation to address transition needs of youths with disabilities has been difficult to achieve due to widely varying factors, including: (1) lack of shared information on students across agencies, making it virtually impossible to develop integrated service plans that support individuals in achieving school and post-school results (Johnson et al., 2000); (2) lack of follow-up data on program recipients that could be used to improve service effectiveness (Johnson, McGrew, Bloomberg, Bruininks, & Lin, 1997; Stodden & Boone, 1987); (3) lack of adequate attention in IEPs to health insurance, transportation, and other aspects of adult living; (4) lack of systematic transition planning with those agencies that would assume responsibility for post-school service needs (Hasazi et al, 1999); Johnson & Sharpe, 2000); (5) ineffectual interagency agreements (Guy & Shriner, 1997); (6) difficulties in anticipating needed post-school services; and (7) inefficient and ineffective management practices for establishing interagency teams (Johnson et al., 1987). Despite these problems, interagency collaboration and coordination of services must continue as a major strategy in addressing the needs of youths with disabilities.

A wide range of collaborative approaches and models has been part of the ongoing effort to improve transition services and post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities and families for more than two decades. OSEP's State and Local Implementation of IDEA (SLIIDEA) study (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) identified strategies by States to improve the coordination of services. The study found, for example, that States have relied extensively on the development of interagency agreements to provide services that support students with disabilities as they transition from school to adult life. The study found that 89 percent of the States have written agreements with vocational rehabilitation, 56 percent with mental health agencies; and 51 percent with agencies responsible for employment and training (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). States have also funded transition coordinators whose primary responsibility is assisting districts to help student's transition from school to postsecondary education, employment, and community living. Currently, 46 States report employing one or more transition coordinators (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). To improve collaboration at all levels, there is a need to:

* Promote regular education and special education collaboration. This would include collaborative models of instruction, student assessment, and IEP and transition planning between regular education and special education to promote positive school outcomes.

* Promote collaborative staff development programs. A variety of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches such as cross-training, train-the-trainer, team-building, and others involving collaborative relationships between State and local education agencies, school-district personnel, institutions of higher education, parent centers, and consumer and advocacy organizations must be promoted.

* Establish cross-agency evaluation and accountability systems. This would include evaluations of school and post-school employment, independent living, and related outcomes of former special education students.

* Develop innovative interagency financing strategies. Fiscal disincentives should be removed and waiver options provided to promote cost-sharing and resource-pooling among agencies in making available needed transition services and supports for students with disabilities.

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