

# CRP BRIEF



**Your Source for  
Issues and Trends in  
Community Rehabilitation**

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## **School-to-work Transition Opportunities and Challenges**

*Research shows that having successful work experience in high school has a tremendous impact on future employment endeavors. CRPs are well-positioned to take the lead in this domain of school-to-work transition. In this issue of the CRP Brief, we will address what transition is and what it can do for your clients and your agency. We hope that it will leave you with new ideas about service opportunities and funding. Jim Hanophy, the author of this issue, is the lead consultant on transition at the Region VI CRP-RCEP.*

### **BACKGROUND**

During the past several years, more emphasis has been placed on school-to-work transition for students with disabilities. This is based, of course, on our emerging understanding that, as with anyone, the earlier a person has positive work experiences the more likely he or she is to be successfully employed in their adult life. Careers and adult employment result from accumulated experiences and not a single plan. This understanding makes it necessary for us to rethink some of the traditional beliefs about employment for people with disabilities and the role of CRP's with school districts. Linkages with the established adult service system create havoc and frustration for schools and families, often leading to lost supports and services. CRP's are in a position to emerge as leaders in the effort to solidify community employment for students with disabilities.

### **Transition Defined**

Although there are some changes in the language of the House version of the reauthorization for IDEA, the focus of transition services remains the same, "improving the academic and developmental achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the move from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment) continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participa-

tion. (HR1350 – Source: National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems)

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMERS**

One observation of school districts across the region has been that there frequently exists within the system a subtle pressure to take this mandate quite literally and arrive at "the answer" instead of "an answer" for students with significant disabilities. We often hear that the high school years provide teenagers with the opportunity to expand their horizons. Valedictorian speeches at commencements across the country typically include images of unlimited potential, being the generation of change and achieving greatness. Students graduate high school with a range of options including careers and post secondary education. Yet for students with disabilities, the pressure to plan an individual's life, including lifelong employment in one job instead of a career, often limits, rather than expands, opportunities. Less than 30% of students with developmental disabilities go on to any sort of post-secondary education and training, and less than 5% go on to a four-year college. Perhaps it should be suggested that instead of finding "the answer" successful transition involves expanding the options for students with disabilities and assisting the student to graduate with planned "next steps."

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Community rehabilitation providers are in a position to be a part of transition processes and to be helpful participants in assisting students with those “next steps” at graduation. This, however, creates its own set of challenges, including eligibility and funding. The transition from school to adult services has often been described as “moving from entitlement to disillusionment.” Public schools are mandated to provide a range of supports and services to students with disabilities relating to employment, independent living and community integration. However, after graduation, families often find themselves trying to navigate through an adult service system that is, at best, fragmented, and whose “firewalls” of eligibility make receiving any services at all a cumbersome task. Attendance at transition meetings by adult service agencies has traditionally been very poor. One Director of Special Services described the “great canyon that divides the services that students receive before graduation and those they receive after graduation” and how students often lose jobs because of related support services (transportation, benefits management). For those students who are able to keep their jobs, the option to receive assistance for career advancement or diversity often does not exist.

### **RELEVANCE FOR CRP’S** **CRP’s as a Community Link**

Funding for CRP’s to provide support services after graduation becomes another issue. Graduates who are employed may not be eligible for State Vocational Rehabilitation services. Unless the CRP has its own funding sources or subcontracts with an entity with which the graduate is eligible for services, they are unable to serve the person. The good news, however, is that CRP’s, out of necessity, have developed the expertise to navigate through the adult service system and find resources for consumers. CRP’s have also been able to understand and utilize naturally existing supports in the community and at employment sites to help people find and maintain jobs. These skills can be of great value to school districts. CRP’s are in an ideal position to bridge the canyon for students with disabilities. The key, it

would seem, is for CRP’s to establish working contractual relationships with school districts and students prior to the graduation of the student, perhaps even as a job placement service. In other cases CRP’s can assist with linkage to vocational rehabilitation services.

### **CRP’s Assisting With Assessments**

Another benefit of CRP’s taking the lead role in bridging the canyon with school districts is the ability to retain and build upon information about the student. CRP’s have learned and demonstrated successfully over the years that the most effective method for assisting a person with a significant disability to go to work in the community is to use an individualized approach of matching the skills, interests and abilities of that person with the needs of an employer. This requires a personalized and detailed assessment of a person over time to fully understand these parameters. This assessment goes beyond standardized testing and traditional vocational assessments, which have been proven over time to yield “false negatives” about employment potential, particularly for people with significant disabilities. Far too often, valuable information regarding the skills, interests, abilities, likes, dislikes and support needs of the student that could significantly enhance the quality of job matches or post secondary training become “lost” when the student leaves school. Yes written records are available. But the true picture of the person often lies in the perceptions and thoughts of the myriad of professionals, paraprofessionals and staff who interact with the student almost everyday, thoughts and perceptions that rarely get recorded in print. CRP’s who are involved in the transition process with students can gather this information and use it to assist with career planning and job matches.

### ***CRP’s can help schools start earlier***

Although addressing employment activities is mandated for transition services, several studies have shown that employment is often not addressed at all until the student is in the final one or two years of school. At face value, this seems to make sense since a person’s first job occurs during their teen years. This however creates an interesting paradox for stu-

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dents with disabilities. Research shows that career and employment related activities do in fact begin much earlier for regular education students than they do for many students in special education. This comes in the form of career awareness and career exploration. Elementary students learn about careers through discussions about occupations, reading stories about people and their jobs and by listening to presentations by reluctant parents on “career day.” At this age, children begin to develop an understanding of the cause and effect of work and money: how money pays for housing, food and transportation. They also begin to think about themselves as working adults, frequently answering the fabled question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” As children progress through middle school and high school, they learn more about careers and begins to consider how certain careers might fit their interests and abilities. Students learn about availability and compensation for jobs in career areas. For many students with disabilities, this progression of career awareness and exploration from elementary school through high school does not take place. Too often students with disabilities have not had the opportunity to see themselves as employable because it was simply not a part of the curriculum. Students with disabilities and their parents are often labeled as “unmotivated” because of their lack of enthusiasm about work and their overall confusion about the possibilities of employment. CRP’s can work with schools and families to introduce work concepts to students with disabilities at a much younger age.

### **CRP’s and Families**

CRP’s find themselves in the position to assist the families of students with disabilities to see the opportunities rather than the limitations for integrated community employment. Many families passively participate in transition activities. They are often reluctant to embrace the concept of community employment for their son or daughter. This is due, in part, to a lack of awareness of successful community employment practices for people with disabilities. Additionally, some families do not participate actively in transition activities because they do not see the significance of these activities. High school for stu-

dents in regular education goes through many transitions. Courses change, teachers change, and electives become a part of the curriculum. However, for some students in special education, there does not appear to be much change. The student may have the same teacher and be in the same classroom throughout high school. Because of this, transition-planning activities are often not seen as meaningful by families. CRP’s are in a position to show families many examples of how an individualized approach to community employment can lead to positive results for their family member. They can help families see the link between transition activities and community involvement. CRP’s have credibility because they are a part of the working community. CRP’s often work actively with family organizations and support groups. Additionally, CRP’s have developed an expertise in addressing family concerns for the safety and support of their family member and in accessing resources that will help families and schools understand benefits and work incentives.

### **SUMMARY**

With the reauthorization of IDEA, it is anticipated that transition services will become further emphasized in the effort to solidify community employment for students with disabilities. CRP’s are in a place to make an important contribution as leaders and could be valuable as advisory committee members and vendors or contractors in providing services to school districts. CRP’s are in a position to carry forward accumulated knowledge of the student’s interests, abilities and skills and to partner with state VR agencies to assist the student with finding employment or advancing his or her career upon graduation.

#### ***Editor’s Note:***

To further address the realm of school-to-work transition issues, the Region VI CRP-RCEP has formed a collaborative relationship with the Irving Independent School District to create a Center for Employment Training. The goals of the Training Center are to provide opportunities for CRP staff to gain field experience and to develop a best practices model for improving school-to-work outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

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#### **Websites & Resources**

Additional information on transition can be found at the following websites:

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oseers/index.html?src=mr>

The ARC: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: <http://www.thearc.org/faqs/qa-idea-transition.html>

IDEA '97 Law and Regulations: <http://www.ideapractices.org/law/index.php>

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