

Chapter 5: Community Collaboration

“Working together, ordinary people can perform extraordinary feats. They can push things that come into their hands a little higher up, a little further on towards the heights of excellence.”

—Source Unknown

Introduction

Youth with disabilities, their families and the rest of the transition team were introduced in Chapters 3 and 4. Research demonstrating the requirement for cross-system collaboration is presented in Chapter 1. The purpose of this chapter is to integrate the roles and responsibilities of all of the partners in effective collaboration strategies.

The National Institute for Work and Learning, Academy for Educational Development (1995, June) report describes cross-sector collaboration:

Carefully nurtured partnerships are an atmosphere of shared vision, beliefs and ultimately, resources. The collaborative process and atmosphere of trust leads to profound change in attitude and actions such as willingness to give up turf and reallocate resources, and in a recognition that effective partnerships take a great deal of time and a commitment of sustained effort for the duration. It is only when individual relationships turn into institutionalized changes and systematic reform of services to students that a school-to-work system becomes sustainable (§ 5).

Compliance: State and Local Agreements

Formal interagency agreements are required by the Rehabilitation Act (101(a)(ii)(D)). This State-level agreement structures a partnership to jointly plan, implement, and evaluate the coordination of services to achieve common goals. The agreement must describe the respective responsibilities of the signatory agencies as well as the outcomes of joint efforts. Interagency agreements provide for:

- 1) Consultation and technical assistance to assist educational agencies in planning for the transition of students with disabilities from school to post-school activities, including VR services;
- 2) Transition planning by VR and education staff for students that facilitates the development and completion of the IEP;
- 3) Identification of roles and responsibilities, including financial responsibilities of each agency, provisions for determining the lead agencies and qualified personnel responsible for transition services; and
- 4) Description of procedures for outreach to and identification of students with disabilities who are in need of transition services.

These formal interagency agreements bring partners to the table and establish the foundation for movement from compliance to commitment.

“The success of the reformed workforce investment system is dependent on the development of true partnerships and honest collaboration at all levels and among all stakeholders. While the Workforce Investment Act and these regulations assigned specific roles and responsibilities to specific entities, for the system to realize its potential necessitates moving beyond current categorical configurations and institutional interests.” (Preamble WIA 20 CFR, Par 652 et al.)

The Rehabilitation Act requires the State VR agency to enter into a cooperative agreement with the One-Stop system created under the WIA and State’s Department of Education for the provision of transition services. Such cooperative agreements or memoranda of understanding provide for a range of coordination, brokering, and supportive services. These services may include: joint recruitment of eligible youth, occupational skills training, job training services, job placement opportunities, labor market and employer information as well as case management, follow-up services and other services designed to eliminate duplication, increase coordination and ensure effective delivery of services to youth. A regional collaboration that models a culture and strategies for State and local partners is described in detail in Appendix B.

FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Written Cooperative Agreements

Narraguagus High School Department of Special Education & One Stop Career Center MOU

A local Machias and Calais One-Stop Career Center in the state of Maine, and the Narraguagus High School Department of Special Education developed an agreement to implement youth program activities required under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act. In general, the high school has developed a work experience program as an option for youth to choose as part of their annual review process. The program emphasizes student-centered career exploration followed by an opportunity for more in-depth skill building. The agreement calls for joint recruitment of appropriate or eligible youth, mutual support in collaborating employment and training systems services for youth, gathering customer feedback and evaluating program effectiveness.

The high school specifically provides academic credit to youth participating in the program, as well as a high school diploma to eligible youth who successfully complete all required courses. The Career Center provides for connections to employers and the job market, paid and/or unpaid work experience and connections to job coaches as funding permits. More importantly, the Career Center is able to pay for a staff coordinator position to develop job sites for youth, to manage the partnerships between the school and employers and follow-up on the skills gained by students on the job, thus ensuring greater integration of academic and occupational skills training.

Aroostook County/Washington County Local Workforce Investment Board, Wendy Schoppe, Career Center Manager, (207) 255-1914, wendy.schoppee@state.me.us

Cooperative agreements can also provide a means for leveraging dollars and services. The regulations that govern the VR program provide the option for VR to enter into third-party cooperative arrangements involving funds from other public agencies. (34 CFR, Section 361.28) In this instance, VR Federal funds have been matched by funds from other State agencies to enhance VR services to their constituents with disabilities. State VR agencies have

formed agreements with Local Education Agencies (school districts) to provide improved transition services. These cooperative relationships, structured by written agreements, generate increased funding and/or improved service delivery for youth with disabilities.

Cooperative agreements and third-party agreements can also serve as mechanisms to fund joint interagency initiatives for innovative programs and service delivery strategies. Such initiatives can include professional development for interdisciplinary transition teams. For example, special transition projects can be developed through a cooperative agreement with Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) or with employers. Agreements can focus on underserved youth, such as those who are in the Juvenile Justice system. Other projects can include transition conferences and transition career awareness weekends for students with disabilities and their families.

► **FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Cooperative Agreements Expand Student Transition Opportunities**

Ohio Transition Weekends for Students with Disabilities

In Ohio, the Rehabilitation Services Commission annually collaborates with non-profit agencies to sponsor “Transition Weekends” for youth who are deaf or hard of hearing and youth who are blind or have visual disabilities and their families. These collaborative career awareness weekends are co-sponsored through a cooperative agreement with the Ohio Department of Education, Office for Exceptional Children, DEAF Initiatives, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and local education agencies and organizations.

Darlene R. Britford, Transition Program Specialist, Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission, (614) 438-1291 voice, (614) 438-1286 v/tty, darlene.britford@rsc.state.oh.us.

Local interagency agreements are not required by Federal law, but may be mandated by State laws or regulations. Local Transition Coordination Councils (LTCCs) have found local agreements to be an effective tool to address expanded interagency collaboration and coordination of services to students with disabilities.

Commitment: What Does it Take to Build and Sustain a Successful Collaboration?

In 1991, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) issued a five-year competitive grant award to individual States to create a system that addresses the transition needs of youth with disabilities. A multi-year evaluation of systems change grants was conducted by the National Transition Network to evaluate the effectiveness of this initiative. The research indicates that systems change did occur in the delivery of transition services. States were successful in:

- 1) Increasing the stakeholder awareness of transition needs and issues;
- 2) Increasing participation of students with disabilities and parents in transition services;
- 3) Enhancing collaborative relationships among school and community agencies; and,
- 4) Establishing and improving policies to support better transition services and

outcomes. (Guy and Schriener, 1997).

Guy and Schriener (1997) describe strategies to achieve the outcomes specified above that emerged from this systems-change research. These five effective strategies include **a) incentives and capacity building activities, b) sustained involvement of committed individuals, c) relationships with complementary initiatives, d) involvement of ALL transition stakeholders, and e) use of evaluation information.**

1. Incentives and Capacity Building

Incentives and capacity building activities include building effective interagency teams at local, regional, State and national levels simultaneously. Effective teams displayed ownership, used consensual decision-making approaches and were empowered by involving all stakeholders. Teams that drew from the talents, resources and awareness of other committed stakeholders and approaches in other locations were also considered effective.

Demonstration projects are one method to build capacity and expand the participation of individuals and communities in transition teams. Usually funded through grants, these projects demonstrate effective practices that can be replicated in other geographic areas, building on existing work. Funding sources are varied and may bring together diverse stakeholders from the community.

► **FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Capacity Building and Incentives**

Transition Services Project

In the State of Michigan, the Department of Career Development, Rehabilitation Services, and the Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Early Intervention, jointly administer the Transition Services Project (TSP). This project provides community partners with information and support for using research-based and proven models and strategies for the coordination of transition services. TSP supports a state-level team representing special education, rehabilitation, families and career and technical education.

It provides fiscal resources, trainings and technical assistance to community partners to facilitate implementation of collaborative transition services. During the second year, the TSP provided a financial incentive to encourage local agreements between the Intermediate School Districts (ISD) and rehabilitation district offices. By June 30, 2000, agreements from all fifty-seven (57) ISDs were approved.

Lynn A. Boza, Ph.D., CRC, Transition Consultant, Department of Career Development, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, (517) 241-3957; email: bozal@state.mi.us.

2. Sustained Involvement of Committed Individuals

Individuals with commitment to “values of transition” are critical to the systems change process at all levels (Guy & Schreiner, 1997). In addition, these individuals display good interpersonal skills, knowledge of systems and of transition, as well as a strong commitment to making changes that would benefit students with disabilities. At the local level, teachers, parents and agency personnel are key collaborators in innovation and change, contributing enthusiasm and support for transition systems change. Their values and personal assets, combined with authority to effect systems change, provides momentum for sustained

involvement. Committed persons holding mid-management to top administrative positions are able to leverage resources and influence cross-disciplinary efforts.

3. Relationships with Shared Initiatives

Relationships with shared initiatives are critical to ensuring the inclusion of students with disabilities in programs and policies designed for all students. To avoid creating separate systems serving transitioning students with disabilities, collaborators must find common ground to maximize existing resources. The alignment of pre-service education efforts in special education, VR and vocational education was cited as one method to ensure inclusion of students with disabilities in the educational system (Guy & Schreiner, 1997).

The sustained involvement of transition-focused stakeholders in complementary initiatives builds a system valuing inclusion and opportunity for students with disabilities. For example in Delaware, VR (DVR) counselors brainstorm with school district personnel in Summer Institutes and strategic planning sessions allowing DVR and school district personnel get to know each other and prepare for the upcoming school year.

▶ FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Relationships with Shared Initiatives

Virginia Chapter of AHEAD (Association on Higher Education and Disabilities)

There has been increased awareness of the need to provide transition services to students pursuing higher education to assist in retention and completion of college training for students with disabilities. Virginia has partnered with educational leaders from colleges across the state as well as the Virginia Chapter of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). The purpose of this group is to determine the transition needs of students with disabilities in accessing higher education and to develop guidelines and strategies that can be implemented on a statewide basis to increase student successes at the college and university level. Thus far this group has developed guidelines for documentation that will create consistency between the colleges and universities in Virginia in requesting documentation for students with disabilities. This group is now working on ways to improve retention at colleges and universities by identifying what type of information public schools could provide to students with disabilities that have chosen college as a transition goal.

Contact Information: Barbara G. Tyson, Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services, TysonBG@DRS.State.VA.US.

4. Stakeholder Involvement

Involvement of all transition stakeholders reflecting a wide variety of organizations beyond education and VR personnel is a challenge. Some education and service systems do not see themselves as stakeholders in the transition process and are reluctant to become involved. One strategy for building the relationships needed for effective collaboration is to conduct a community audit or community resource mapping activity. Engaging in community resource mapping is an opportunity for stakeholders to become collectively involved in the development and implementation of a project. It also helps stakeholders and partners address what they can contribute to a system, as well as how they stand to benefit from the partnerships.

5. Evaluation Process

As a strategy to produce effective outcomes, evaluation information promotes discussion of what works and what does not, but also identifies what gaps exist in the system and what can be done to address those gaps. Involving stakeholders in designing the evaluation system provides meaningful and useful results. The evaluation results must be used to develop and implement future strategies. Evaluation components for programs and processes resulting in effective collaboration may include leadership, communication, commitment, and accountability. Design of the evaluation process must be mutually determined by all partners and continuously evaluated for its performance. An example of such an evaluation process is the Iowa Paths Collaboration Survey (see Appendix C).

▶ FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: Using Evaluation to Shape Efforts of Local Transition Team

Berks County Transition Coordinating Council (BCTCC): Fruits of Interagency Collaboration

The BCTCC is a local, cross-systems team comprised of educators, agency staff, parents and students. The BCTCC utilizes the results of student follow-up surveys to guide the direction of their work. Some of the transition products developed by the Council include a Student Transition Portfolio, a Transition Handbook for students, teachers, and parents, an Agency Forum, an Employability Expo, and an IEP Exit Packet.

Contact information: Lynn Zale, Rehabilitation Counselor, PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Reading District Office, lzale@state.pa.us.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

- **Identify all potential partners in the transition process and develop a strategy to build relationships with each of them individually and collectively.**
- **Bring key partners to the table, and be sure to address how they can benefit from the partnership.**
- **Develop and implement State and local interagency agreements that facilitate collaborative transition services provision.**
- **Build capacity and incentives through demonstration projects and shared resources.**
- **Sustain involvement of committed individuals by setting attainable goals and achieving them.**
- **Develop relationships with complimentary initiatives.**
- **Involve ALL stakeholders.**
- **Use evaluation information for continuous improvement.**