

**TRANSITION RESOURCES FOR ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION
(TRACE)
LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE**

Introduction

Transition Resources for Adult Community Education, known by its acronym TRACE, is a transition program that operates as part of the San Diego Unified School District. It serves young people age 18-22 years who live within district boundaries, have an IEP, and who have not received a high school diploma.

The program currently serves about 600 students. Half of TRACE's students have developmental disabilities, but the program is open to students with any federally-defined handicapping condition. TRACE received a CalSTAT award in the core message area of Transition.

Impetus for Change

A district transition program has been in place for over twenty years.

However, the promulgation of standards through IDEA, and the expectation that students will pass the high school exit exam, contributed to the need for transition services for students who did not meet those standards.

Transition planners at TRACE were familiar with community conditions and could see that students with special needs who exited high school without a diploma needed a great deal of support.

"Those students would end up in the community and fall off the face of the earth...we're in the business of saving lives right now."

-Interviewee, TRACE

In addition, many educators with TRACE had been witness to IEP meetings that did not allow space for students with a disability to articulate what they wanted.

"We have been in some really nasty IEP's where the students weren't speaking up for what they want...and that's so against what we believe."

-Interviewee, TRACE

There was also a high level of concern about the dropout rate for students with special needs.

“You’ve got a fifty percent dropout rate [for students with special need]s...Those kids aren’t going on to higher education. They’re going on to our jails. They’re going on to our substance abuse programs. They are going on into a multitude of different places....that was the most alarming thing for me.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

TRACE’s enrollment has doubled in the last year alone. Growth in the program is attributed to word-of-mouth advertising and to referrals from agencies in the service and education network for disabled young people. In addition, five years ago TRACE expanded its services beyond those who were developmentally disabled to those who were also emotionally or socially disabled as defined by federal guidelines.

“It grew through PR, kids telling kids that there’s somebody there that can help you... We can look at the whole individual. Other agencies don’t have that luxury.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

The School’s Model

TRACE is a decentralized program employing thirty teachers to provide transition planning in community settings for students who qualify. There is no central office or building for staff beyond administrative offices; transition work is done in the field, at student homes and in community settings. Referrals into TRACE come from high schools, alternative schools, Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS), day treatment programs, or simply self-referral by students themselves. TRACE’s practice is to serve all who qualify for service.

Person-Centered Planning

The central element in TRACE’s service delivery is the use of “person-centered planning,” a process by which students themselves, together with those in their support network, develop and implement transition plans.

“The students...coming to us are ill-prepared, unfortunately...to take responsibility for their lives...and so [we help them] through the process of empowering them...and teaching them that they have those skills.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

In the planning process, TRACE teachers convene the student’s natural support network and support the student in identifying goals in several different domains, which correspond to IDEA-mandated areas of transition. TRACE has created the curriculum guide which serves as the framework for this process. Initial assessments provide information on the starting point for students’ action planning.

Data on progress toward goals is collected every semester. Sometimes students themselves are able to document their own progress.

“It’s important for them to take [down] their own data....they have to gauge how well they’re doing in whatever activities they’re doing.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

TRACE’s person-centered planning approach suggests that the most important task for teachers in the planning process is to listen in order to identify student priorities and goals.

“We determine what their dreams, nightmares, aspirations...are...then we begin to travel down the road as best meets their desires.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

The transition plan goals are crosschecked with IEP goals, but in contrast to IEP’s, they focus on student strengths and positive attributes, rather than on deficits.

Point of Transition

TRACE also provides “point of transition” services to its students with developmental disabilities. This is a natural extension of the planning and coordination TRACE conducts with other community agencies in order to support its students. When a student is in the last year of enrollment in TRACE, they are placed on a “try-out” basis with one or more of the programs into which they would transition as an adult. The students can thereby enter the program on a provisional and temporary basis. If the program turns out to be a fit for the student, they can stay with it, easing the transition from TRACE into their adult life and into their service connection to the regional center. During the “try-out” time, TRACE pays the daily rate that the program would normally receive when the student “aged into” the program.

“[It’s] so their last day of public school at twenty-two will look exactly like their first day of adult life, which is that notion of seamlessness for the students.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

Data

All program forms, templates, and curriculum materials as well as individual student data and case notes, are available to TRACE staff on Sharepoint, a data system designed in-house to support teachers’ work in the field and program administration and reporting. The system is updated daily, and all forms and materials are available in Spanish and English.

Assessments are completed initially and at the end of each semester, with students as appropriate completing their own assessments. Data on student employment and progress is reported out twice a year.

Student Participation and Advocacy

At TRACE, students run the programs' governance meetings. While student participation was always requested, only in recent years has the participation become strong and vocal. Teachers attribute the change to the empowerment that students experience in planning and acting on transition goals.

"The governance meetings are very dynamic compared to what they used to be - Very efficient and...powerful."

-Interviewee, TRACE

Students also participate in statewide conferences on disability education and advocacy, such as **People First** and **Supported Life**.

Collaboration and Planning

TRACE holds monthly staff meetings.

Program administrators take one day a week to cover teachers' caseloads. With 30 teachers and 600 students, this provides each teacher with preparation or planning time about two to three times per year.

TRACE administrators place a priority on planning and coordination with agencies responsible for services to disabled youth in order to ensure access and to aid in seamless transitioning. TRACE collaborates with the regional center, county mental health services for children and adults, community colleges, universities, WorkAbility programs, the juvenile justice system, and other agencies as needed to serve their students.

TRACE administrators attribute program success to committed and skilled staff.

"They're just problem solvers. And that's a very neat place to be with kids, because they've got lots of problems and lots of things that they've got to figure out."

-Interviewee, TRACE

TRACE staff, in turn, has also found they can rely on students to guide them.

"I've learned over the years...that we don't have the answer within ourselves [as teachers] because if we had, we would have solved it a long time ago. The answer really rests within the students."

-Interviewee, TRACE

How They Did It

The district's long experience with transitions programs led its staff to undertake a process for creating a different approach for better serving young adults with disabilities transition from high school to adult life. The staff's vision of what a transitions program could be helped to guide them through the planning process. Using their existing sources and levels of funding, they created a new model that was "person-centered" and community-based.

Planning

The planning process for a new student-centered and community-based transitions program began with the vision of the program's principal. With the program's staff on board with the vision they began researching programs at school districts around California that embodied elements of their vision. The staff collected research reports, worked with faculty from area universities and brought in a several outside experts to help with the design of the new approach. All of this was done using existing program resources.

As described above, the key design elements of the new approach were "person-centered" where students were engaged in developing and assessing their own goals; community-based with students and staff almost wholly engaged in community-based services and job opportunities; and a focus on the point of transition to help students find the most appropriate programming as they move from the TRACE program to community-based adult services.

Ongoing

By designing the program to be community-based, most of the overhead costs of maintaining a building and employing support staff were eliminated. This means that more of the program's financial resources could be targeted toward providing student services, such as subsidizing the salaries paid to its students by local employers. Rather than conducting the program at a place or building, the program is decentralized, with students and staff meeting at neighborhood recreation centers, community libraries, and portable classrooms located at three area community college campuses. In all, program related services are provided at over 30 different locations. The intent was to move its teachers and case managers from "classrooms to the community."

The program is funded primarily through regular ADA funding from the state, federal Title I funds for low income students, other federal rehabilitation dollars, and a TPP (Transition Partnership Program) grant from the Department of Rehabilitation. These dollars support a staff that includes:

- a principal;
- two resource specialist teachers who serve as assistant administrators;
- three psychologists;
- a computer technician;
- two nurses; and
- 72 paraprofessionals, most of whom serve as the program's caseworkers under the guidance of the resource specialist teachers..

The program also supports counselors at every high school in the district to work with students on transitioning from school to adult life.

Under the direction of the resource specialist teachers, caseworkers work with students out in the community. Their caseloads are typically twenty-five to thirty students for students with less severe disabilities, and a maximum of fifteen for more seriously disabled students. Depending on a student's level of need, caseworkers may hold weekly advisory meetings or conduct less intensive check-ins. Caseworkers also work with students on achieving specific tasks, such as getting a drivers license or developing work skills.

In 2007 the program also hired a new resource teacher whose responsibility is to work with students who are in reach of passing the state's high school exit exam, CAHSEE, to help them pass and earn a diploma. This teacher worked with nearly 60 students in the first year.

TRACE has been very successful in reaching out to partners within the community who serve adults with disabilities. In 2007 TRACE contracted with 11 adult agencies to provide point of transition services for 21 year olds in the program. Among these agencies were the United Cerebral Palsy Association, Partnerships with Industry and the United Way.

The program received its first CalSTAT grant in 2007, using most of the funds for professional development topics such as expanded training for the program's paraprofessionals, treating individuals with respect, and teaching job skills.

Reasons for Success

The TRACE program's success begins with the strong vision that has guided it from the beginning. Other factors contributing to its success include a program design that meets the needs of its students, a wellspring of community support among service organizations and local employers, and strong support from the students' parents. They can see the benefits the program brings to their children.

Results

At any point in time, about three quarters of TRACE students are in continuing education or training.

“... When we started offering them alternatives to a curriculum that they had been unsuccessful in, for ten to twelve years, you could then begin to look at the light going on...A youngster who is going to go to work and be successful in that world of work...was as excited as a youngster who was going to Harvard...It created meaning in their life...”

-Interviewee, TRACE

Upon exit from the program, 100% of students with a developmental disability are engaged in vocational activity, in either paid or volunteer employment. For the overall student population, 65% are employed when they graduate from the program.

“The biggest change is...by the time they leave us they’re really speaking up for what they want...It’s amazing how much they can articulate their dreams, goals, what they want to do in life.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

Challenges

Funding for the TRACE program is always an issue, with staff feeling like they are constantly working to achieve more with fewer dollars. There is greater concern than usual this year as the state struggles to deal with a serious budget shortfall. They are looking at ways to adjust their spending next year in order to absorb anticipated budget cuts.

Maintaining the program’s quality, while undergoing rapid growth is another concern. Due to continued strong enrollment growth, TRACE anticipates hiring four to five new teachers and ten more paraprofessionals next year.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

TRACE administrators would like to expand their “point of transition” services, currently offered only to students who are developmentally disabled, to those with other kinds of disabilities. They know that stronger connections need to be made with the adult mental health service system in order to make such a program a success, and they are pursuing funding to provide coordinated access to specialized mental health services for that purpose.

“Right now we have a pretty big demarcation line between juvenile mental health systems and adult mental health system...Making sure the kids are connected and moving in those systems fluidly...is one of our biggest challenges right now.”

-Interviewee, TRACE

They also hope to improve their ability to identify and recruit students coming out of high school. One strategy they are considering to accomplish this is to begin working with students earlier in their high school careers and placing them in community-based jobs sooner.

Other issues they hope to address include increasing training for paraprofessionals who are working with students as case managers, and expanding the range of community partnerships for meeting the needs of students.

How It Works: Two Students' Stories

“I remember when we were first doing person-centered plans; I would take the notes and put it into a little booklet with pictures to go along if they didn't read...One student... carried that with him in his backpack every single day. He would go up to people he would just meet, and he'd show them, because he was so proud of it and...it was about him. It was a little snippet of him.”

“[There was] the mother that swore her daughter would really just never have a job...just be at home, really, she'd be taking care of her...and when [her daughter] graduated from TRACE...she was working at [a supermarket], getting to the job on her own...[Her mother] wrote in a letter to us... ‘Never...did I imagine that my daughter could do those things...but because of TRACE she's pretty much on her own.’”

-Interviewees, TRACE