

**WASHINGTON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
TRANSITION TO ADULT LIVING (TAL)
LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE**

Introduction

Washington Unified School District's Transition to Adult Living Program (TAL) serves students age 18-22 with moderate to severe disabilities who live in the district and are served by the local Regional Center. Washington Unified serves the town of West Sacramento, in eastern Yolo County; about 7,000 students attend WUSD schools annually.

Students from the district have the choice of accessing TAL or participating in other transition programs located at high school campuses in Yolo County. Since the program's inception in 2004, all eligible students in the district have opted to enter TAL. Currently, TAL serves about nine students annually, and 40% of its students are Latino. TAL received a CalSTAT award in the core message area of Transition.

Impetus for Change

Prior to the creation of TAL, students in Washington Unified eligible for transition services were referred to a program based on the campus of Woodland High School, twenty miles outside of town. The district's new Director of Special Services was interested in creating a local option and conducted a cost analysis showing substantial savings if the students were served in West Sacramento.

"I found...that we could operate...an absolute state of the art program for actually less than we were paying to have the kids shipped out of town."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

The school board concurred with the analysis and approved the development of TAL. When searching for a site in which to locate services, program staff found that commercial storefronts, a traditional location for similar community-based transition models, were too expensive for the program's budget. They identified a house to rent at an affordable price and found that the home-style setting was a boon in assisting with independent living goals.

The District's Model

The transition program operates from a rented residential location in West Sacramento from 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. TAL has based its program on best practices for transition programs as identified by OSEP, and focuses on developing skills in employment, independent living, and travel, and on establishing seamless connections to adult services upon exiting TAL.

TAL is staffed by a teacher and two paraeducators, one of whom is bilingual in Spanish and English. The district psychologist and school nurse are also available to serve TAL students. TAL staff had a long history of serving disabled students at the district's high school, and brought their familiarity with students and the understanding of their histories into the program as assets in helping them transition into the community.

Staff works as a team to teach independent living to students.

"The success of this program is with my coworkers. If we aren't working together, it's not working."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

On most days, the student population is split, with half staying onsite and half going out into the community.

The program offers an internship with Pride Industries, whereby students travel twice a week to Pride in Sacramento to work. Some students are able to locate jobs elsewhere in the community, and wage supports are available through TAL for employers who hire them.

Support for all aspects of employment are offered, including completing applications, preparing for and going on job interviews, timeliness, behavior on the job, work expectations, and more.

"They know if they want a job outside of Pride, they have to endure things that they may not like, and that's true to life."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

The program also creates recreation and leisure opportunities, and will include students and adults from other transition or independent living skills programs in Yolo and Sacramento counties in their planned activities.

"What we've...noticed...is...they're bonding with other adults...outside their family unit."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Teachers are in constant communication with parents, both to update them on progress of students, but also to help parents learn about transition and how to support their children in gaining independence.

After students leave the program, staff stays in touch informally, seeing them at the Pride Industries site, phoning families or students to check in, contacting caseworkers at the Regional Center, or simply seeing them or families at TAL.

“We still have [a student’s] mom and grandma come...they just really miss the program, and they’ll bring us oranges from their garden...and fruit and vegetables, and will come over just to say hi...and she’s been gone for a year now.”

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

How They Did It

In 2004, the district hired a new Director of Special Services who had been involved in the statewide administration of transitions programs with the California Department of Education. She used her expertise to evaluate the district’s current program options and design a new district-based program that would better serve its students. The program has not only been successful in providing better services for students, it has saved the district money as well.

Planning

When the district’s Director of Special Services first joined the district she did not feel that the current transition program options were adequately serving the district’s students. She conducted a cost analysis comparing the costs of contracting for services, as the district was doing at the time, to those of an in-house program. Her analysis found that a district-based program could provide higher quality and more age appropriate programming for substantially less money. After receiving approval from the school board and district administration to move forward, she used her experience and expertise as a state-wide transitions administrator to design the new, district-based program. The costs to the district of this planning process were negligible since the transitions program was part of her regular job responsibilities.

Ongoing

The costs of the transitions program consist of salaries for the three staff, rent for the house which serves as the program’s base, public bus tickets for transporting students to and from the center and work locations, and materials. Given these costs, the district estimates that it is saving \$40,000 to \$50,000 per year compared to the cost of the previous contracted program. The program’s staff believes that this program is not only saving money but better serving the district’s students. The design of the program more effectively teaches “real life” skills such as independent living and job skills. Experience with the program so far indicates that its students have been more successful in obtaining full-time employment upon leaving the program than in the past.

One of the strengths of the program has been its ability to form partnerships with other community organizations. It partners with Pride Industries to provide job training and offset some of the students' transportation costs. These services are provided at no cost to the district. The state's Regional Center also contributes \$40 per student per month toward the cost of bus passes.

In order to provide enhanced social opportunities for their students, the program has developed a partnership with the city's Parks and Recreation Department to include their students in city-run recreation programs for adults with disabilities. They also hope to develop a local Special Olympics program in the future.

The CalSTAT grant awarded to the district in 2007 has helped to enhance the reputation of the program. The program has used most of their CalSTAT funds to support professional development for the staff. Some of the money was also used to send students to a life skills conference, and to purchase program enhancements such as adaptive exercise equipment.

Results

"She [now] works three days a week...Every day [that] she has to go to work, she gets herself up and she gets herself ready...and this is a student that when she came...she would sit in the middle of the street and say, 'I'm not going anywhere.' Just day by day, changing, changing...If it hadn't been for this home, this program, that young woman would have been homebound."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

One indicator of the program's success is its high attendance rate, which has been maintained at close to 100% throughout its operation.

"I think the attendance sheet is a real solid data element in terms of the program's success when you consider these are 18-year olds. They're outside of compulsory ed. They don't have to come here."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Teachers have observed an increase in skills across all areas.

"Compared to past years, we've seen incredible jumps in what they are capable of doing."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Social skills are gently encouraged.

“When the school first started, [during break time] they’d just all sit there. Okay, we can’t just sit here, we need to do something. So next time, one might be at the table coloring. ‘Well, how old are you?’ ‘I’m 20.’ ‘Well, don’t you think you’re a little too old to color?’ So we had a lesson: what kinds of things do you think you can do for free time? We [now] have a whole book shelf of books, games...So now when they have free time, out [come] the games, the books - and they’re chit-chatting.”

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Students learn how to handle money and budgets, buy clothes and food, and cook and clean. The home setting provides a natural setting to learn activities needed for independent living.

“We’re hearing that...especially at Christmas, they’re actually going out and buying presents for their families.”

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Reasons for Success

The staff attributes the program’s success to the following factors:

- Strong support from the school board and superintendent. They gave the staff the freedom to try another approach to serving these students by developing a district-based program.
- The program’s staff has high expectations for all students. Students are taught real life skills that are appropriate for their age.
- The rental house provides a base and focus for the program which helps promote a sense of community for the students and keeps them engaged.

Challenges

The program’s reliance on public transportation creates logistical difficulties, particularly since the transit systems between Yolo and Sacramento counties are not well articulated. However, TAL purposefully chose not to acquire a van for student transportation, so as to create opportunities for them to learn to use the transit system before program exit.

Helping parents understand their children’s needs and abilities regarding independence is an ongoing challenge.

“Our biggest obstacle is parents enabling the student, doing everything for them. But we all have had lots of communication with the parents, and have kind of put our [foot] down and said, ‘If you want your student to succeed at this...you need to back us up.’ And they’ve been really good about it.”

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Some parents prefer - for any number of reasons - that their children's income go directly to the family, and are reluctant to allow the children to make independent financial decisions that might run counter to family financial interests. While this can create a challenge, communication with families about student needs and program goals is constant and can help bridge these difficulties.

Generally, the program faces few challenges.

"The program is running very, very smoothly...we're probably one of your more problem-free programs."

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Living Program

Next Steps and Scaling Up

While TAL has no current plans to expand, they have received calls and site visits from other programs seeking to replicate their approach. The award from CalSTAT has publicized and validated the usefulness of their approach. They have heard that a nearby school district is looking for a house from which to implement a transition program, and know that their program is seen as a model locally and statewide.

They have identified the annual Supported Life Conference in Sacramento as a venue for presenting their work in the near future.

Programmatically, the staff hopes to identify more diverse job opportunities for their students and to develop new partnerships with community resources.

They would also like to reach beyond teaching basic job skills to developing students' entrepreneurial skills.

Finally, they hope to develop an individualized assessment for each student, a portfolio containing individual goals and indicators of progress that can be used to guide instruction for each student.

How It Works: One Student's Story

“Safeway was more than eager to hire one of our students, and I said we wouldn't bring anybody in unless we really felt that they could do the work, and they would be successful. So [our student] came in and we set the hours [because] we wanted to be sure she wouldn't be working some strange hours...They loved her, and they hired her permanently afterwards, and they kept her hours...she took the bus to get back and forth...She wanted to learn how to use her debit/VISA, so she got a savings account with [the bank]...and she decided how much she wanted to transfer over from her checking [to her savings] once she got paid...She was very successful in using that debit/Visa...which is quite an accomplishment...I had the privilege of talking to an undergraduate class at Sac State [California State University at Sacramento] and I asked them, ‘How many of you have a checking account?’...they raised their hands. ‘How many of you write down all our checks?’ Fewer of them raised their hands...‘How many of you write down when you make a withdrawal or deposit for your debit card?’ And there might be two or three hands...So [we] taught her skills that undergraduates at Sac State aren't [even] using.”

-Interviewee, Transition to Adult Life Program