

The Special EDGE

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A Transition Success Story

What Makes WorkAbility Work?

S "... a finish worthy of the start"
—W.B. Yeats

Some things start with great promise and go nowhere. Other ideas look good at the beginning and only get bigger and better. The WorkAbility program in California has proven itself to be a charter member of the latter club. Almost 25 years ago, a California Department of Education study pointed to the fact that California was not giving its high school students who were receiving special education services the quality vocational training they needed in order to find employment and independence after they leave high school.

Apparently California was not the only state suffering in this area. In the early eighties, the national employment figures for adults with disabilities were pretty dismal: only 30 to 33 percent had jobs at all, and that figure included part-time work. The need was apparent, and good minds went to work. Madeline Wills—then secretary of the federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS)—began introducing her Bridges concept around this time, creating a conceptual model of what is now understood to be those essential services that offer students a "bridge" from high school to successful employ-

ment: in short, transition. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Upward Bound, and Head Start also started working creatively and effectively with young people with disabilities, with the goal of nurturing their talents, self-determination, and independence. It was out of these models of support and training that WorkAbility took shape.

California's transition efforts in their current form have their roots in a small pilot project that started in 1981. WorkAbility itself officially began in 1982 as an interagency agreement between three state agencies: the Employment Development Department, the State Department of Rehabilitation, and the California Department of Education. The program now has sites in 305 local education agencies, and it serves all 58 California counties. Among other things, it currently offers comprehensive pre-employment training, employment placement, and follow-up for high school students in special education who are making the transition from school to work, independent living, and/or postsecondary education or training. This range of services includes providing students with an understanding of job-seeking and job-keeping skills and offering them occupational class

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Commission on Special Education*

training and on-the-job experience.

Why WorkAbility works

The most obvious reason for WorkAbility's growth and success is the basic good sense of the idea: high school students with disabilities benefit from practical, customized, and hands-on preparation for adult employment. But an ingredient every bit as vital is the amount of energy, enthusiasm, and absolute commitment of the people involved. Countless numbers of individuals—from the California Department of Education to the state advisory committee to the various regional organizations to all of the numerous program staff in between—have worked tirelessly

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Informing and supporting parents, educators, and other service providers on special education topics, focusing on research-based practices, legislation, technical support, and current resources

By Dr. Alice Parker, Director of the Special Education Division of the California Department of Education

"If you continue to do what you have always done, you will get what you have always gotten." The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have effected some improvements for students with low incidence disabilities (LI).¹ But the value achieved from these laws has been less for students with LI than for students in other disability groups. Considering the small number of students involved, it is no surprise that this group is often the most "forgotten minority" among students with disabilities (see chart below). **Challenges.** The way a typical non-disabled student learns is by advancing through various developmental stages, beginning with sensory perception. Students with LI experience altered or fragmented sensory inputs that result in large developmental gaps. Core curriculum must be expanded to "fill in the holes." However, the content used in teacher preparation programs and on-going staff development for general education teachers have not been adapted to meet LI students' special needs. Another challenge is the lack of qualified teaching staff, which results in high caseloads. It is especially difficult to serve rural students where the general population is sparse. Perhaps the most devastating statistical outcome of such challenges is the unemployment rate for LI adults, which has remained stable over the past few decades: 19 percent of deaf adults and nearly 30 percent of visually impaired adults are unemployed.²

Utilizing technology. For LI students, technology is necessary for success. With the advent of electronic note takers, refreshable electronic Braille displays, and screen readers, a visually impaired person can independently access enormous amounts of information on the Internet. Also using technology, the onerous and expensive process of transcribing a 1,183-page biology text (which typically takes nine months and \$16,962), for instance, could be replaced with electronic Braille files, provided by publishers at no additional cost. Congress has been working for over two years on legislation that requires standardization of electronic file formats for textbooks that will give universal access to all students, including those with disabilities.

Reevaluation. Recommendations have been made that each teacher of students with LI be assigned a caseload of eight students. However, a caseload of eight students may be too high or too low, depending on the functional level and educational needs of the students. In addition, the on-going inability to recruit and train sufficient numbers of teachers renders this proposed standard impractical to achieve. One solution is to explore and utilize satellite-linked classrooms, cellular communications, and Web cameras that enable video conferencing for an interactive learning environment in place of a one-location classroom. One highly qualified, off-site educator could be augmented by paraprofessionals, parents, and volunteers at various remote sites who reinforce student learning.

Crucial to the success of LI students is a mandatory requirement for on-going staff development. With the focus on integration, least restrictive environments, and full inclusion, we need different models for delivering services, models that include collaboration and consultation. Teachers need training to expand their skills and to learn how to support both peers and parents.

Lastly, we need to develop better methods for assessing the performance capabilities of students with LI. Testing needs to be designed in a way that doesn't penalize a particular student because of a disability. Once again, technology could provide alternative methods of assessing student performance and competencies.

The challenges facing us as we work to educate our children with low incidence disabilities are similar in many cases to educating children with other disabilities. Most of the uniqueness in educating LI students is the result of the small numbers of students in the group and the fact that almost all of these students suffer from some sensory deprivation. By working together, looking at how we deliver educational services, and using our resources better, there is no doubt that we can improve outcomes for these students.

1. Federal Law 20 U.S.C 1400 § 673(b)(3) defines LI as "(A) a visual or hearing impairment or simultaneous visual and hearing impairments; (B) a significant cognitive impairment; (C) any impairment for which a small number of personnel with highly specialized skills and knowledge are needed in order for children with the impairment to receive early intervention services or a free appropriate public education."
2. This doesn't even consider the number of hearing impaired and visually impaired individuals who are "under-employed"—that is, have entry-level jobs despite having higher educational degrees.

School-Aged Children with LI*

Multiple Disability	0.19%
Autism	0.12%
Hearing Impairments	0.11%
Orthopedic Impairments	0.11%
Visual Impairments	0.04%
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.02%
Deaf-Blindness	0.001%

* The 2002 annual report to Congress estimated that less than one quarter of one percent of the resident school age population have LI.

High School Initiative Proposed

The week of high school graduation is traditionally packed with celebrations—friends and families throwing parties for their graduating seniors, showering them with gifts. Fifty years ago in many communities, this marked the end of the academic road: the diploma and the parties launched the majority of 18-year-olds into the world of work and adulthood, with all of its responsibilities and independence.

Things change. This past year, according to U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, "almost 64 percent of high school graduates from the class of 2003 were enrolled in colleges or universities in the fall," and "the college enrollment rate of recent high school graduates. . . remains [at] near historically high rates." While the party throwing and gift giving have remained, the number of young people for whom high school graduation marks the end of their formal learning has dwindled considerably. In fact, we have now come to understand that, in order to remain in the workforce, we can never stop learning, formally or informally.

But an ironic set of developments has added a curious overlay to this picture. While more students than ever are going on to college, more students than ever are in need of remedial support once they get there. In addition, for those students who do not choose college after high school—who, it is often assumed, are not that interested in study and simply want to get to work—the workplace is getting more technical and competitive daily. Almost all well-paying jobs require

training after high school. We need our car mechanics to know computer programming; professional cooks to be skilled mathematically as well as culinarily; our hairstylists and visual artists to understand some chemistry. This kind of list could go on for some time. Many students have skills and interests that lead them on to various courses of post-high school vocational training.

There are, in addition, many students whose ability levels or disabilities make particularly problematic—and sometimes impossible—the more common expectations of study/training/job after high school. These are students for



whom many assumed goals are ultimately possible without the right kinds of intense supports. Finally, there are students who have seriously profound disabilities, but who are still able to enjoy full, rich, and meaningful lives—again, with the right kinds of training and support.

Preparing all of these students to meet the world as young adults presents no small task. To complicate matters even further, public high schools in California hold one of the most diverse populations in the country, if not the world—diverse ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially. It's not surprising that high schools are

being severely challenged in their efforts to prepare students for the responsibilities that exist on the other side of graduation.

Senate Bill 1795

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell had these challenges and concerns in mind when he introduced a package of bills in support of his High Performance High Schools Initiative. Among these is Senate Bill 1795. Sponsored by Senator Richard Alarcón (D-Senate District 20), this bill ensures every student in California of having access to a high school education that prepares him/her

for post-secondary options. Practically speaking, this means that all students will know that college preparatory courses and rigorous career technical courses are available to them, and that all students who request these courses will get them. The bill will also launch an effort to better align high school content standards with the admission standards of the UC and CSU systems. This will be done

with the help of a task force comprised of stakeholders who are in the best position to advise on these matters.

Assembly Bill 164

The nature of high schools and the kind of leadership they require are very different from those of schools at any other level, with the challenges facing administrators of large, urban high schools being particularly onerous. In addition, many of California's most highly qualified administrators are scheduled to retire within the next decade, and the state will soon be facing the prospect of replacing them. With all of this in mind, O'Connell

H.S. Initiative, continued on page 12

to create an integrated statewide structure of support that meets the transition needs of thousands of students every year.

Since 1990, with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), these kinds of transition services have become law nationwide. It's arguable that WorkAbility was not just a premature appearance on what is now a federally mandated scene, but that it actually helped to guide—or at least inspire—parts of that eventual federal mandate. And WorkAbility in California remains a model in the world of school-to-career transition services. Since its inception, it has been called upon to take the lead in developing a national language for transition services and support. It has been designated one of the ten best transition programs of its type in the country, along with receiving national recognition for its successful efforts to match young adults who have disabilities with employers who need workers.

Collaboration and mentoring

Another reason for WorkAbility's overwhelming success is the collaborative nature of the effort. WorkAbility is a model of productive partnership: it describes itself as a "strong and realistic commitment between business, education, and community consisting of clearly defined goals; mutual benefits; and open, ongoing communications." Hundreds of organizations in both the public and private sectors are active participants in WorkAbility. Just last year the program served over 110,000 students and was successful in placing 30,000 with over 10,000 employers statewide.

Internal mentoring and support

Another factor in WorkAbility's success is its extensive mentoring structure. There are over 200 sources of support for program directors, all clearly charted for every conceivable need. This network grew, in part, out of necessity.

The small staff at the state level could not meet the needs of all of the people involved in implementing the program, so they developed this extensive network to help people find the support they needed using the vast expertise that is available in the field. (For an impressive example of the kind of resources the program offers, see the freely downloadable WorkAbility handbook at <http://www.tulare.k12.ca.us/workability/menthandbook.htm>.)

The mentoring the program provides its students is even more impressive. Jake Johnson, former WorkAbility student, was happy to speak about that topic. He was a student when he got

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his first job through WorkAbility when he was sixteen, and he remains convinced that this experience was responsible for the strong work ethic he has developed and his good employment habits. By Jake's estimation, he has been unemployed for all of 45 minutes over the last eighteen years and can count on one hand the number of times he's been late for work during that period. He gives WorkAbility staff Martha Griese a great deal of the credit. She "instilled confidence in me," according to Johnson; "she was excited about the program, excited about my abilities, and determined to find me the job I wanted."

Jake's first job had him rolling dough in a pizza parlor. His prospective employer was reluctant to hire him at first but, in Johnson's words, "WorkAbility doesn't come to a

community begging." The program offers to pay the wages of student employees for their first six weeks on the job, with the option on the employers' part of letting the students go if, after that time, "it doesn't work out." As is typical of WorkAbility students, Jake came to the job well trained. In general, these job placements succeed far more often than they fail and have become one of the sweetest win-win deals in the history of special education in California.

Jake is one of the many WorkAbility success stories worth dwelling on. In his early twenties he realized the benefit of a college education, especially as an opening to a realistic career for someone with his visual impairment. So after (by his own admission) "a couple false starts," he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and is now putting the finishing touches on a Masters Degree in teaching English as a second language—this while being employed full-time by the California Department of Finance as a Systems Software Specialist 1. Success story, indeed.

One final, critical aspect of WorkAbility's design—and its organizational success—is its basic grass-roots structure. While designed around the individual student's needs, abilities, and interests, it constantly adjusts in every location to take advantage of—and tailor its services to—local economic, social, and geographic needs and resources.

At the personal level, the program meets a critical need. For a young person with a disability, confidence and self-esteem are hard-won qualities. This comes as no surprise to any adult who can remember the often painful task of growing up. When compounding this challenge with an overlay of obvious, un-asked-for difference, along with the harsh fact that much of life can simply be a great deal more challenging for people with disabilities, the goal of gaining confidence in one's ability to navigate life as an adult becomes daunting at best. In the face of this, the

services that WorkAbility provides become even more valuable. When Jake reflects on his high school experience, he remembers the many pull-out classes and sessions that, while he knew they were necessary, made him feel different in a way that was not always comfortable. WorkAbility was something else entirely. For Jake, it was the one exclusively special education experience that his regular ed. friends wished they could have been a part of. It was that good.

Public advantages

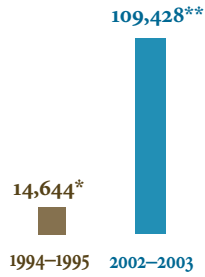
The public, social advantages of a program like this are likewise obvious. WorkAbility gives a person with a disability the chance for employment, with all of the welcomed independence and personal satisfaction that goes along with being needed in the workplace and bringing home a paycheck. And then that person contributes to society by providing a service or creating something, while paying taxes. This pattern of working and paying taxes often extends beyond high school, thus reducing dependence on long-term public financial assistance. Again, everyone wins.

In light of this, it's encouraging to note that California has made a significant financial commitment to the program, and its growth is a clear reflection of that commitment (see chart 1). The budget for WorkAbility is more than what most states allow for their entire special education efforts, but the investment has shown itself to be some of the best-spent educational dollars on record.

Three parts

At the high school level, there are three basic components to WorkAbility. The first is the "school-based component." This consists of activities that prepare students to move from school into the world of work. They include vocational classes and special career or technical training; counseling and guidance to help students discover their strengths and interests; education in workplace etiquette; self-advocacy training;

Chart 1
WorkAbility I: Growth¹



* Students served from high school population
** Students served from high school and middle school populations

- The numbers above, and all data in this article, are taken from WorkAbility records. WorkAbility tracks the students it serves while they are still in junior high or high school, but it also follows many of its students for two years after they leave the program. Middle schools were not funded for WorkAbility prior to 1998.

coaching in writing job applications; interviewing skills; and more.

The second part is the actual "work-based component." This includes activities like job shadowing, internships and apprenticeships, school-based business projects, actual employment,

and the like. Finally, there are the "connecting activities": these include mentoring, job coaching, parent participation—anything that supports the student in his/her life on the job. To make all of this work, the program nurtures innumerable partnerships in support of its students: partnerships with individuals and organizations involved in special education, vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation, along with parents, community organizations, and the business sector.

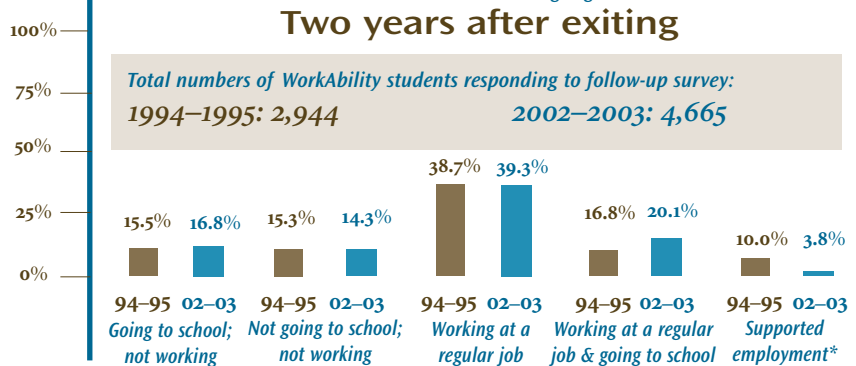
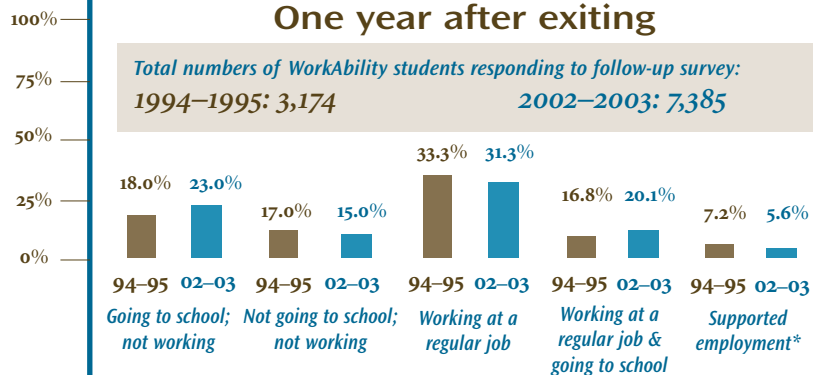
An expanding reach

In 1998, WorkAbility began extending its reach into middle schools and junior high schools, and thus expanding its growth (see Chart 1). As with all things related to WorkAbility, that component too has grown, with 80 current pilot programs that help early adolescents begin reflecting realistically on their futures and start exploring careers.

These WorkAbility programs at the middle and junior high and high school levels are officially referred to as

WorkAbility, continued on page 6

Chart 2
Work Status Follow-Up
One year after exiting



* Supported employment provides assistance for individuals with the most severe disabilities for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred. This assistance takes the form of job coaches, transportation, assistive technology, specialized job training, and individually tailored supervision.

WorkAbility I. But early in its formation, in the program's efforts to provide a continuum of services and supports to as many individuals with disabilities as possible, WorkAbility spun off into more components. WorkAbility II was started in the fall of 1985 to enhance collaboration between two state departments: Rehabilitation and Education. Operating from Adult Schools and Regional Occupational Centers and in conjunction with local offices of the Department of Rehabilitation (DR), it helps provide vocational services to adults and out-of-school youth. WorkAbility III (also initiated in 1985) represents another interagency agreement, this time between the California

community colleges and the DR. As it works with people with disabilities who are both community college students and clients of the Department of Rehabilitation and who are in need of employment, WorkAbility III also offers direct job placement services, transition assistance into employment, and a variety of other support services.


A very close cousin is Workability IV, which began in 1992-93 by establishing cooperative interagency programs between the DR, California State Universities (CSU), and University of California (UC) schools. With sites located on numerous campuses, it is designed to assist UC or CSU college students who are DR clients and who need transition support from school to career.

Data-informed

The recent insistence at both the state and the federal levels on making decisions based on research and data reads as old hat for WorkAbility. From the program's inception, it has kept records on students who go through the program, surveying them for two years after they leave (see Chart 3). These data indicate that WorkAbility staff in the field are successful in their efforts to refine their follow-up techniques in tracking students after they leave the program. This success is particularly evident when one realizes that the majority of students with disabilities have a learning disability, which makes the very act of responding to this kind of follow-up particularly problematic.

WorkAbility's positive influence on students has been clear from the start: students involved in the program have lower dropout rates than students with disabilities who are not involved. And it doesn't stop there. Current figures point to the program's lasting benefit for students after they leave high school (see Chart 2 [page 5] and Chart 3). More WorkAbility students are working at a regular job and/or going to school than they were ten years ago. And fewer are neither going to school nor working.

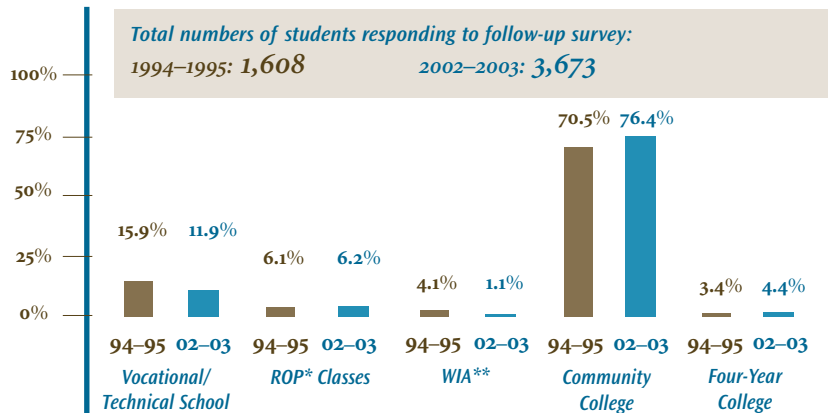
Using the data it gathers to direct the changes and improvements it makes to its program, WorkAbility continues to improve and grow. Leaders within the organization are cognizant of one fact: life is one continuing transition. And the more proven beneficial supports there are in place at every step of the way, the greater the likelihood that their students will be able to realize a successful, self-determined, and independent life.

WorkAbility's success hinges on three basic qualities: its customized, flexible structure; its built-in mentoring and network of supports; and the passionate commitment of the people involved. This suggests a formula for success for any organization—in fact, for any person, for every life. 

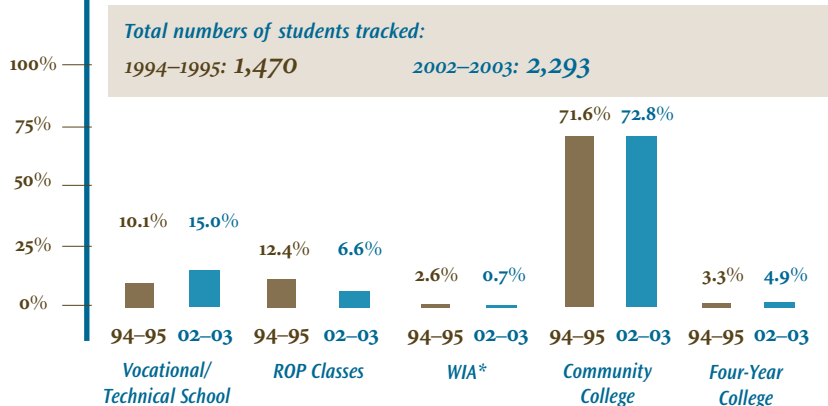
Post-Secondary Activities Follow-Up

Chart 3

One year after exiting



Two years after exiting



* Regional Occupation Programs: offer students classroom programs that provide unpaid on-the-job training that is directly related to the student's instructional programs and often provides paid work experience

** The Workforce Investment Act: offers services to help prepare youth for the workforce

Transitions Begin Early and Never End

By Bayla Greenspoon, MS Ed and Pamela Jakwerth Drake, PhD; ETR Associates (Education, Training, Research)

The First 5 California Informal Child Caregiver Support Project has been investigating a largely hidden and often underserved population: caregivers who are family, friends and neighbors (FFN) of the child for whom they provide care. These caregivers are important: they provide care for about one-third of all children in the U.S. from birth to five years of age (Sonenstein et al., 2002). To date, there has been no large-scale study of the use of FFN care in California. However, national and state studies indicate that parents often choose this type of care because it is usually more flexible and affordable and because it addresses issues of trust and cultural congruity (Brown-Lyons et al., 2001). Previous studies record these as important issues for all families, including those of children with special needs.

The First 5 California Informal Child Caregiver Support Project was initiated by the First 5 California Children and Families Commission, which has been funded since 1998 by a tobacco tax implemented through the passage of Proposition 10. First 5 California has been instrumental in creating significant services for children birth through age five and their families throughout the state and has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to considering children with special needs. Supporting and linking all of the systems that are involved in the care and early education of all young children—their families, child care providers, healthcare providers, and schools—has been among First 5's primary goals.

School Readiness

The importance of these kinds of efforts is made even more evident by research on early brain development, which indicates that the first years of a child's life—the years prior to kindergarten—

are critical to growth and development. Adults who foster secure attachment relationships—help children feel good about themselves, talk with children, read to children, play with children, and provide developmentally enriching materials and experiences—greatly contribute to a child's ability to succeed in school (Copple and Bredekamp, 1997; Howes, 1999; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2000; Rogers and Sawyers, 1988). Clearly, quality early education can play a significant role in supporting positive development and ensuring school readiness, particularly for children whose



families are struggling with a variety of challenges. One of these challenges can be parenting or caring for a child with special needs.

In general, family circumstances vary greatly, and many ironies exist within that variety. The family of a child with a disability—the very family most needing to mobilize extra support, resources, time, or energy to meet the demands of their special child—often simply can't (Carlson et al., 1996). Basic survival frequently takes precedence over thoughts about school readiness, for example. Furthermore, if this is a family's first

experience with the world of special needs, family members may feel anxious and isolated, making it even more difficult to find the energy necessary to mobilize extra support. These factors suggest the kinds of supports a caregiver can offer parents in helping them prepare a child with a disability for being included in a school setting.

The job of helping any child get ready for school, and most especially a child with a disability or other type of special need, is not something that can be done in isolation. This fact makes it essential for all involved to communicate, collaborate, and develop systems that best serve all children and families. This allows the child to make a successful transition from one stage of life (the early years) to another (the school years and beyond). For example, if parents and other caregivers have clear information about what will be expected from children in kindergarten and how they as adults can address these expectations, the transition can be greatly eased for all involved—the child, the family, the caregiver, and the kindergarten teacher. A major goal of the Informal Child Caregiver Support Project has been to acquire information that will serve to support this transition.

Focus groups and interviews

This project has conducted research on the needs of caregivers of children with special needs under the age of six, using 21 telephone interviews with parents and FFN caregivers of children with disabilities and other special needs, using as well 45 focus groups that included parents and FFN caregivers of children with special needs (Drake et al., 2004).

Findings from the project

Challenges. Both parents and caregivers felt that the most common challenges facing the caregivers fell into two categories:

First Five, continued on page 8

Physical difficulties. This included difficulty moving or sitting, medical problems or persistent illness, needs for special equipment, and needs for special care to keep healthy.

Behavior. This included poor attention spans, being unable to sit for even short periods of time, being hyperactive, throwing tantrums, acting out due to frustration, or not recognizing dangerous situations.

Also mentioned were concerns about a child's **social well being**. Some children do not interact with many (or any) age mates, have poor social skills, or are withdrawn. Finally, some participants mentioned **poor communication** skills as a potential challenge. They said that it is often difficult to understand what a child needs or wants, making a caregiver's situation even more challenging.

Needs and Barriers. Research participants discussed four categories of needs and barriers: materials, knowledge/information and ideas, personal resources and support, and community resources. Mentioned most often were needs for the following:

- **Toys**, especially toys that help with a child's unique physical or sensory need: those that are stimulating and colorful, with lights or sound that imitate "talk" and help with speech.
- **Information related to disabilities and other special needs**, either in general or about a specific disability or need with which a caregiver is faced. Participants wanted guidelines for what they could realistically expect of a child at different ages, what they could do to help a child progress to full potential, and how they need respond to medical or other situations that could arise.
- Participants also expressed concern about a lack of **community resources** that, if available, would help them address their challenges. Some wished for **parks** that are safe and accessible, with special playground equipment for children with disabilities. Some also requested **community centers** with programs and activities for children with disabilities.

- **Transportation** presented a barrier to many caregivers, who said that they did not drive or did not have a car, thus making it difficult to take a child to a doctor's appointments or community locations like the park.
- **Lack of money** was most often mentioned as the primary barrier to obtaining the resources listed above. Others included language barriers, lack of time, and lack of needed materials.

Implications for practice

These needs and barriers, once identified, suggest two important implications for special educators:

- **Outreach is needed to parents and caregivers prior to children entering kindergarten.** Many children with disabilities who are in the care of family, friends, or neighbors (FFNs) are not receiving early intervention services; and their families and caregivers are not receiving the supports they need. This threatens the chances for school readiness in young children. Furthermore, FFN caregivers often have little, if any, access to training in child development and education. Therefore, it behooves the field of special educators to seek out ways to better identify these parents and caregivers and offer them the education and help they need to assist children in their development, thus making possible a successful transition to school.
- **The need for support for parents and caregivers will likely continue after the children enter kindergarten.** Many parents will continue to rely on FFN care, even after their children enter school. Providing parents and caregivers with the information they need—including specific disability-related information, resources for accessing toys and other equipment, and ideas for overcoming accessibility barriers in parks—will help them support and enrich the efforts of the educational system and, more importantly, the development of the child. Additionally, the challenges identified by parents and caregivers concerning children's physical difficulties and behavior may also present challenges to general education teachers. Providing teachers with strategies for addressing these challenges will help foster mutual collaboration and inclusive education.

Summary

It takes a community to raise a child, and much critical "raising" is done in the first five years of life. For every child, with or without special needs, to get the best start possible, the community of adults that has the most contact with the child, influence, resources, and information in the early years must come together in support of one another. Their jobs as parents, caregivers, and educators are made infinitely easier as a result. And the best result is a child who is supported to reach his or her full potential. 🍀

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he could do his book reports, also using the picture method to represent his understanding. And, most important to our family, students in some of his classes were willing to work with Chad on group projects. As it turned out, Chad and the students he worked with all learned from each other.

Together with Chad's teachers we devised other plans based on how Chad learns best: with an established routine. As a team we developed an approach that was beneficial for everyone—teachers, Chad, and other students alike. In addition, my husband volunteered in classrooms as a parent helper and on the playground as a recess monitor. Gradually, we established a rapport.

Seeing changes

After a time, we saw amazing changes. At IEP meetings, teachers began reporting exciting and important news about all the great things my son could do. It had become clear to the IEP team that we as parents were willing to give as well as get and that we were devoted to helping our son learn in a typical classroom setting. As a team with renewed commitment, we proceeded to develop a transition plan that Chad could take with him to high school.

High school was different in many ways from middle school. When Chad finished middle school it became necessary for him to have a one-on-one aide. (In middle school he had developed some behavior problems that required one.) For whatever reason, Chad developed inappropriate behaviors that always seem to be seen around his birthday. We took him the doctor seeking advice on how we as a family could help him to cope. It was suggested that his behavior could be related to normal adolescent hormonal changes, and that it could possibly become more intense as he got older. For this reason the IEP team made the decision that a full-time aide would allow him the help he needed to participate in general education classes. His RSP (resource specialist) teacher, with the

assistance of our family and his aide, developed a modified and personalized curriculum for him, which was vital to Chad's eventual success.

Given what we as parents had learned and the good foundation built in his earlier school years, high school offered a better atmosphere from the beginning. I am convinced that being in ROTC, with all of the routine that it involved, was a very important reason he did as well as he did. IEPs during Chad's high school years were always full of discussions about what we as a team envisioned for Chad's future beyond high school. The IEP team identified his interests (cars, art, and money) and found classes that supported those interests. Eventually, Chad was even able to work for a few hours a week in a store that sold car products. He loved it. All of these experiences led to greater self-esteem, which in turn helped Chad develop coping skills to deal with difficult situations in a more positive way. And this, of course, led to fewer behavior problems.

Looking ahead

In 2000 we were one year from Chad leaving the traditional high school program. So we all needed to explore transition programs for 18–22-year-old students. After investigating what was available to us, we settled on a program that gave its students the opportunity to attend Sacramento City College classes. Called the Duplex because of the structure where it was housed, this program was ideally located down the street from the college campus. The location and the program's inclusive component most impressed me. We really wanted our son to have the opportunity to attend college, just like his older brother and sister.

So after Chad crossed the stage at high school graduation in the class of 2001, a moment that was exciting enough, we were even more proud and excited to be looking forward to his transition to the adult school program and to taking college classes. Again, we were able to find classes that Chad liked. He had always been interested in cameras and art, so we were convinced that photography and a drawing class would be a good start, with

a physical education class for exercise rounding out his program at seven units.

Discovering talents

The classes at the Duplex started two weeks before college classes. This gave students a chance to become familiar with each other and the staff and to get to know the college campus. Chad still had his one-on-one aide, who was able to support him at his college classes when they started.

While Chad eventually left the Duplex, he was hooked on college art classes. We found him another program that included courses at City College. The IEP/ITP (Individualized Transition Plan) team again developed a program specific to Chad's IEP/ITP goals: taking all the art classes he could, and then more P.E. for his health.

After Chad's first semester, we saw a big change in his self-esteem. His talent for art blossomed, and his sense of accomplishment grew along with it. Chad's talents and skills have developed to where he is now selling his art commercially (he even has a webpage where you can look at his awesome abstract art work: <http://www.cbadsart.com>).

Through this process of discovering what he is good at and how he can realize his talents, Chad's sense of himself socially has blossomed, too. He is very popular in his classes and is often greeted by students who have known him from his earlier school years—and now through college.

As a happy ending to Chad's story I can only list all of the critical things I have learned as a parent of a son with special needs: the importance of always seeking information and asking for advice; having high expectations for yourself, your child, and those who teach your child; establishing relationships with the professionals who are responsible for providing the services your child will need to be successful in adult life; being willing to give as much as you get. And never giving up!

The challenges have not been easy, but the satisfaction of his successes has been worth all the hard work. 🎨

Transition from School to Adult Living

The last two issues of The Special EDge (Autumn 2003 and Spring 2004)

By Diana Blackmon, EdD

featured Part I and Part II of “Transition from School to Adult Living.” Part I discussed self-awareness, the first phase of transition preparation and planning. This includes students’ knowledge of their own learning and personality styles, interests and aptitudes, and skills in how to regularly reappraise information about themselves. Part II explored career awareness: knowledge of the relationship between school and work and the many career options available; career preparation: knowledge of the behaviors and skills needed to be successful in work; and work experience: the opportunity to hold an actual job, learn first-hand work-place expectations, and start to see what career “fits.” Part III explores independent living and community access, discusses the role of adult service providers, and offers suggestions for making the Individual Education Program (IEP) process more meaningful through transition planning.

Independent Living and Community Access

Independent living and community access includes the knowledge and skills necessary to live, work, and play in a community as independently as possible. It’s important for all young people to have opportunities that allow them to live independently and access community resources, but this is especially critical for young adults with disabilities who may need extra assistance.

Living independently as an adult requires the ability to make decisions about a sometimes overwhelming number of things. Providing students with instruction, information, and opportu-

nities to talk about these challenges while they are still in high school will help them prepare for the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood. For example, how will they be supported? Through a job? College financial assistance? Social Security? Where will they live? Alone? With a roommate? In a supported living arrangement? How will they maintain a healthy lifestyle? Equally important to a healthy lifestyle is what they will do for recreation and who they can count on for their network of social support.



Housing

All young people need to know about the cost and responsibility of maintaining a home, whether it is an apartment, shared housing, or supported living arrangement. Many young adults experience living on their own for the first time when they go off to college, and they often find themselves unprepared for independent life. While being on their own seems attractive at first, the reality of living on a budget; maintaining their room, apartment, or home; and being a responsible commu-

nity member can become overwhelming. To prepare young people for success in this area of independence, educators and families should discuss with them the cost and responsibilities of adult living. It is important to emphasize that living independently involves more than just paying the rent. It also involves keeping a clean environment and being a good neighbor, along with maintaining a healthy lifestyle and all of the discipline and regulation that this effort requires. For young people with more significant disabilities, families should visit supported living facilities to see which one is most appropriate for their son or daughter. Local Regional Centers (see below) are a good source of referrals for supported living.

Maintaining a Budget

Preparing a budget is generally an eye-opening activity for someone who has never had to do it. Preparing three budgets is particularly useful: one for living at home, one for living alone, and one for living with a roommate. Newspapers and online rental listings can be good places to find the actual cost of housing in a given area. For an independent living budget to be effective, it needs to include everything: rent, food, utilities, phone, entertainment, clothing, car insurance, etc. Often young adults want to own their own car, but when they are faced with the actual costs involved, such as car payments, insurance, maintenance, and gas, they often find it more feasible to wait until they have a good, full-time job. Preparing comparative budgets and weighing the options will give students a better idea of what to expect when they are on their own and may help them—or their parents—avoid being blindsided by unanticipated expenses and suffer the often demoralizing consequences.

Health and Safety

Young people face many choices when they move into adulthood. When teachers and families talk with them about lifestyle choices and provide information, they give young adults a foundation for making good decisions throughout life. For example, asking students, “What is a healthy lifestyle?” opens a discussion to issues like exercise and nutrition. It also invites conversations about smoking, drinking, and taking drugs; about getting the right amount of sleep; and about knowing how to deal with stress. A healthy lifestyle involves making responsible decisions about sex and relationships. It involves knowing how and where to get medical attention in case of emergencies. And, it addresses the issue of regular check-ups and examinations and why they are so important. Adults may take making decisions about a healthy lifestyle for granted, but young people need opportunities to explore these issues with adults they can trust—before making wrong decisions!

Recreation

Obesity is a national epidemic, in part because television has become the primary form of recreation for many Americans. It is never too early to begin discussions with young people about getting out of the house and getting active—physically and socially. On the other hand, many young people play in some form of sports or have hobbies and many friends. For them, the hard decisions will involve time management—how much time to devote to recreation, hobbies, and friends versus how much time to devote to school and work. For young people with fewer opportunities for recreation and social activities, it is important to develop these kinds of outlets before they leave high school in order to avoid social isolation as adults—an unfortunate reality for many adults with disabilities and a debilitating reality for anyone.

Community Access

Individuals with disabilities must know what resources are available to them in their communities and where to find them. Local newspapers, phone books, or online directories are good places to begin. Educators and families can give young people opportunities to become familiar with researching resources by providing research tasks such as, “Find the local library, parks and recreation department, or medical facility using the phone book or online directory.” If a particular agency or resource will be used frequently, like public transportation, students should be given many opportunities to actually use the service until they are able to access it independently.

Community Responsibility

As important as knowing how to access community resources is knowing how to be a responsible community member. Students should

understand their responsibility to vote and the importance of making informed decisions when voting. They also need to know how to locate their designated polling place. On the other hand, social responsibility and environmental responsibility are best taught through actual experience. Young people need many opportunities while they are still in high school to volunteer in their communities so that helping others becomes a habit and a lifelong practice.

Adult Service Providers

For students with more significant disabilities, the transition into adult living involves ongoing support by adult service providers. The following is a list of service providers for individuals with disabilities and the services they offer.

Department of Rehabilitation <http://www.rehab.cabwnet.gov>

For individuals with physical or mental disabilities that substantially impede their employment, and for those who need vocational rehabilitation services, the Department of Rehabilitation provides assessments, counseling, vocational training, placement assistance, supported employment, transportation, and necessary work-related tools and equipment.

Department of Developmental Services/Regional Centers

<http://www.dds.ca.gov>

For individuals with mental retarda-



tion, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, or any condition requiring treatment similar to mental retardation, the Department of Developmental Services and Regional Centers provide service coordination, training in independent living skills, assistance securing housing, transportation, day activities, supported employment, and medical services.

Department of Developmental Services/Supported Living Services

<http://www.dds.ca.gov/livingarrang/sls.cfm>

Supported Living Services from DDS assists adults with developmental disabilities in selecting and moving into a home, choosing personal attendants and housemates, and acquiring house-

Transition, continued on page 12

hold furnishings. The organization also helps individuals navigate common daily living activities and emergencies, participate in community life, and manage personal financial affairs, along with other supports.

Social Security and Social Security Disability Insurance

<http://www.ssa.gov>

This insurance provides cash benefits to eligible individuals who are unable to work due to age, disability, or injury.

Protection and Advocacy, Incorporated

<http://www.pai-ca.org>

Protection and Advocacy, Incorporated, protects the legal, civil, and service rights of Californians with disabilities by providing information, referrals, technical assistance, and direct legal representation to any consumer or family member.

California State Independent Living Council

<http://www.calsilc.org>

Independent Living is a philosophy and a movement of people with disabilities who work for self-determination, equal opportunities, and self-respect.

Conclusion

All secondary school students would benefit from the list of instruction and activities described in this series of articles, but it is a legal requirement that schools provide them for students with disabilities. To reverse the trend of low high school and college graduation rates and high unemployment and poverty rates for individuals with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that IEP teams include transition language in the IEP for students

age fourteen and older. But all too often, the transition section of the IEP, sometimes referred to as the Individual Transition Plan, is viewed as just another form to complete. In fact, the transition plan is the most important section of the IEP for secondary students because it does the following:

- Connects school to adult living
- Identifies students' post-school goals
- Delineates what supports students will need in order to achieve their goals
- Discusses where students will live and what assistance they may need

- Identifies community access and independent living supports
- Provides connections to adult service providers, if appropriate

Furthermore, the IDEA requires that students participate in the planning process and IEP meetings because transition planning and transition language in the IEP is, to repeat, not just another form: it is a student's future!

In fact, that is the purpose of K–12 education: to adequately prepare all young people for adulthood. In an era of standards-based education and high-stakes testing, it may seem like there is no time in the instructional day for transition planning. However, connecting school to adult living by identifying a student's interests and goals, familiarizing students with the services and supports they will need in order to achieve those goals, and helping them in very practical ways prepare for what they will do once they leave school—these may be the very things that help students stay in school.

Regardless of ability, all young people benefit from a comprehensive program of instruction and activities that directly prepares them to meet their futures. ♪

*The purpose of
a K–12 education
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included Assembly Bill 164 (sponsored by Assembly Member Mark Wyland, R-Assembly District 74 and Assembly Member Lois Wolk, D-Assembly District 8) in his high school initiative. This bill, officially called the Principal Training Program, provides professional development for high school principals and administrators in the following areas:

- School finance and personnel management
- Core academic standards
- Curriculum frameworks and instructional materials that are aligned to the state's academic standards
- The effective use of assessments and their resulting data
- The use of instructional technology to improve student performance

Essentially, this professional development training includes whatever high school principals and administrators need to strengthen their ability to serve all students.

Senate Bills 1448 and 1405

Two additional bills complete O'Connell's package. Senate Bill 1448 (sponsored by Senator DeDe Alpert, D-Senate District 39) would reauthorize the statewide STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) system and ensure ongoing quality in that statewide student assessment.

Senate Bill 1405 (sponsored by Senator Betty Karnette, D-Senate District 27) is designed to create a state seal of approval for high school instructional materials in order to align them with state content standards. This will make it easier for high schools to find appropriate, quality text books for their students.

Taken together, these four pieces of legislation represent a serious and concerted effort by the state's top educational policymakers to ensure that California's high schools are doing a world-class job of preparing all of its students for the best future possible. ♪

The RiSE (Resources in Special Education) Library lends materials to California's public free of charge. The items listed on this page are just a sampling of what is available. Go to <http://www.pbp.com> to view the library's complete holdings and to request materials online. To order by phone, call librarian Judy Bower at 408/727-5775, extension 110.

Transition

Integrating Transition Planning into the IEP Process

By Lynda West et al. Council for Exceptional Children: Reston, VA; 1999, Second Edition. 68 pages. Call numbers 23011, 23012. This helpful book explores ways for schools, community service agencies, private organizations, and families to work together to help students make a smooth transition to adult life.

Learning a Living: A Guide for Planning Your Career and Finding a Job for People with Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Dyslexia

By Dale Brown. Woodbine House: Bethesda, MD; 2000. 340 pages. Call numbers 22945, 22946. This career guide is written for people with learning disabilities by someone with firsthand experience. It discusses everything a person needs to know in order to find the best possible job that emphasizes strengths and minimizes the effects of a disability.

Making the Transition Team Work

By Sandy Thompson et al. Minnesota Educational Services: Little Canada, MN; 1998. 132 pages. Call numbers 21221, 21222. This practical book assists members of transition planning teams to develop common sense, transition-focused IEPs that use every available resource to prepare young adults with disabilities for successful adult lives.

Meeting the Needs of Youth with Disabilities: Examples of Students with Disabilities Accessing SSI Work Incentives

University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, MN; 1999. 78 pages. Call numbers 22803, 22804. This publication provides detailed examples illustrating the process of applying for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) work incentives and demonstrating how students with disabilities can benefit from them when utilized during the transition planning process.

Social Skills Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs

By Darlene Mannix. Prentice Hall: Paramus, NJ; 1998. 261 pages. Call number 23071. This collection of 187 ready-to-use worksheets is designed to help special students in grades 6–12 build the social skills they need to interact effectively with others and learn how to apply these skills to various real-life settings, situations, and problems.

Teaching Functional Skills

By Don Bastian. Attainment Company: Verona, WI; 2000. 144 pages. Call number 22398. IDEA regulations mandate a transition plan for all secondary education students in special education. Daily living skills, community access, and vocational training are emphasized, along with general education achievement.

Teaching Self-Determination to Students With Disabilities: Basic Skills for Successful Transition

By Michael Wehmeyer, Carolyn Hughes, and Martin Agran. Paul H Brookes Publishing: Baltimore, MD; 1998. 354 pages. Call numbers 22947, 22948. This book offers versatile instructional methods for teaching basic self-determination skills to students with disabilities. The materials assist teachers in meeting IDEA requirements and planning transition programs according to student preferences.

Transition Education and Services for Adolescents with Disabilities

By Patricia Sitlington, Gary Clark, and Oliver Kolstoe. Allyn & Bacon: Boston, MA; 2000, Third Edition. 422 pages. Call number 23070. This book covers the transition of individuals with mild and moderate disabilities to all aspects of adult life. It includes not only the transition to employment, but also the transition to future living and post-secondary educational environments.

The Transition Handbook: Strategies High School Teachers Use that Work!

By Carolyn Hughes and Erik W. Carter. Paul H Brookes Publishing: Baltimore, MD; 2000. 416 pages. Call numbers 22553, 22661. In this handbook, the authors compile more than 500 research-based, teacher-tested, transition support strategies that have been proven to work for teachers, employment specialists, families, and students. It offers strategies for every part of the transition process.

Transition Requirements: A Guide for States, Districts, Schools, and Families

By Jane Storms, Ed O'Leary, and Jane Williams. University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, MN; 2000. 106 pages. Call number 11463. This book offers guidelines for evaluating and improving the transition process, incorporating transition plans into the IEP process, a summary of related legislation, answers to common questions, and sample forms. (Also available online at <http://interact.uoregon.edu/wrrc/trnfiles/trncontents.htm>)

Transition Services Under the IDEA: A Practical Guide to Legal Compliance

By Leonard Garfinkel. LRP Publications: Horsham, PA; 2000. 147 pages. Call numbers 23019, 23020. This book explains why transition services are necessary, how the process works under IDEA, and which students are entitled to transition services.

Transition to Adulthood: A Resource for Assisting Young People with Emotional or Behavioral Difficulties

By Hewitt Clark and Maryann Davis. Paul H Brookes Publishing: Baltimore, MD; 2000. 293 pages. Call numbers 22550, 22658. From premier researchers, educators, and practitioners in the field, this handbook delivers practical methods to help young people with emotional or behavioral difficulties pursue their interests and goals as they move into greater career-oriented education, work, independence, and responsibility.

Investing in the Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Productive Careers

The 28th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues entitled *Investing in the Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Productive Careers* is available online. The publication provides an overview of legislation—both the spirit and the letter of the law. It also suggests strategies for community members, offers roles for increased empowerment of youth, describes tools for collaboration, and suggests action steps for moving local communities from compliance to commitment. Go to http://www.rcep6.org/IRI_Publications.htm#Investing to access the document and for more information.

Transition

<http://www.jobcorpshealth.com/disability/>

Accommodating Students with Disabilities: A Tutorial for Job Corps Staff

This site offers a Job Corps tutorial on Accommodating Students with Disabilities, designed to provide Job Corps admissions counselors and center staff with information and resources that will allow them to better support and meet the needs of applicants and students with disabilities. It also offers resources and reference materials that are relevant to anyone who works on behalf of youth with disabilities.

<http://www.disabilitystudiesforteachers.org>

Disabilities Studies for Teachers

This website is packed with information for teachers who are committed to including issues of disability in their teaching. It includes lesson plans, organized according to units (topics), with background essays and links to a variety of publicly accessible websites containing historical source documents. It also has essays on why teachers should include disability in their teaching and on "differentiated instruction" (how to adapt the curriculum for diverse learning styles) and much, much more.

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/rel/pn/fb/yr04contents.asp>

Fact Book 2004

This fact book from the California Department of Education, filled with statistics and information on a variety of subjects concerning education in California, is now available and downloadable for free at this website.

<http://www.heath.gwu.edu>

The HEATH Resource Center

This center, which operates out of George Washington University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development, is the national clearinghouse on post-secondary education for individuals with disabilities. Its website offers resources, publications, links, and practical answers to questions about navigating the world of higher education with a disability.

http://www.rcep6.org/IRI_Publications.htm#Investing
Investing in the Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Productive Careers

This document—*Investing in the Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Productive Careers*—is available and downloadable for free. This publication addresses nearly every topic pertinent to transition: legal aspects, community collaboration, family concerns, and more.

<http://www.fdic.gov/consumers/consumer/moneysmart/index.html>

Money Smart

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) has launched this free training program, which is geared to teaching adults outside the financial mainstream how to enhance money and banking skills. Of the 49 million Americans with disabilities, one in three live at or below the poverty level. Money Smart is designed to help address this problem. It consists of ten instructor-led modules on basic financial topics and presents a valuable opportunity for organizations interested in training persons with disabilities.

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/>
National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability—NCLD/Youth

Making the connection between youth with disabilities and employment, NCLD/Youth is a great source of information about employment and youth with disabilities. Its website offers information for administrators (program directors and managers), employers and businesses, policymakers, and youth and their families.

<http://www.pacer.org/publications/transition.htm>

Parenting Postsecondary Students with Disabilities: Transition Resources

This list of very inexpensive publications from the Parent Advocacy Center for Educational Rights offers a wealth of resources on a variety of topics as they relate to transition: chronic illness, independence, vocational rehabilitation, self-advocacy, disability and sexuality, supported employment, and more.

<http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/>

The Ragged Edge Magazine

This online version of *The Disability Rag* is devoted to articles on disability rights. It also offers a free email newsletter that explores similar issues.

<http://www.ncset.org/stateresources/resources.asp>

State Transition Resources

Select state transition offices share links to their most valuable transition resources. On this new site, you will find manuals, toolkits, curricula, websites, and more for everyone involved in supporting the successful transition of youth with disabilities to adult life.

http://www.calstat.org/special_edge.html#guides
Transition to Adult Living: A Guide to Secondary Education

This comprehensive workbook walks parents and young adults through the process of planning for a successful transition out of secondary school and into more independent living. It is available at this address and downloadable for free.

Advisory Commission on Special Education

Plans to Award Transition Programs

Understanding the lasting impact of effective transition programs on youth with disabilities, the California Advisory Commission on Special Education is working to design an award that will recognize exemplary transition efforts in the state. At their September 2004 meeting, the commissioners will determine details and protocol for the award, which will then be formally opened for applications. The winner will be announced on May 26, 2005. Be sure to read the next issue of *The Special Edge* for more details, or check the ACSE website (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/as/acse.asp>) in October for more details.

SEPTEMBER 29–30

Connecting the Pieces: Family Violence, Substance Abuse, and Children At-Risk

This 18th annual conference of the Children's Network is designed for educators and administrators, therapists, counselors, medical and law enforcement personnel, and parents. The event will address issues of domestic violence, child abuse, and substance abuse as interrelated risk factors. Ontario, CA. Contact Jennifer Celise-Reyes, jcelisereyes@bss.sbcounty.gov, 909/387-8966. Go to <http://www.sbcounty.gov/childnet/> for registration materials.

OCTOBER 14–16

Learning Disabilities: Finding Solutions

This annual conference of the Learning Disabilities Association of California is designed for parents, educators, and health care professionals, including psychologists and social workers. Offering new neurological findings that suggest that learning disabilities are fundamentally a medical problem, the event is designed around numerous learning strands: Medical/Psychological; Sensory Response/Language Acquisition; Education/Techniques and Technology; Juvenile Justice; Early Identification; the School-Age Child; Adolescence and Transition; and Adults with LD. Ontario, CA. Contact Louise Fundenberg, oclda@comcast.net, 949/673-5981; or go to <http://www.oclda.org>.

OCTOBER 21–22

Rebuilding Our Dreams; Renewing Our Spirit

The purpose of this annual conference of the California Alliance Concerned with School Age Parenting and Pregnancy Prevention (CACSAP) is to support communities and their agencies in efforts to help adolescents make responsible choices about pregnancies and parenthood. The event's key speaker is Clay Roberts, who will speak on "The Politics of Prevention and Why There Is Reason for Hope." Irvine, CA. Contact Mary Lou Williams, mail@cacsap.org, 916/451-3904.

OCTOBER 25–26

High Expectations for All Students: State Superintendent's High School Summit 2004

This summit provides an opportunity to

discuss how to raise expectations for all students by providing a rigorous and relevant standards-based curriculum. The summit will focus on the High Performing High Schools Initiative, recent research about high-achieving high schools, and the promising practices of schools that have obtained excellent results. Sacramento, CA. Contact Tina Woo Jung, tjung@cde.ca.gov, 916/319-0818. Or go to <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/relt/yr04hset1025.asp> for more information.

NOVEMBER 16–19, 2004

Migrant Education Even Start 10th Annual Conference

This conference of the California Migrant Education Even Start (MEES) project focuses on early childhood developmental and kindergarten readiness skills for migrant children from birth to seven years of age. The conference is designed for educators and early caregivers who work with this population. Sacramento, CA. Contact Adriana Simmons, asimmons@bcoe.org, 916/443-9225; or go to <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/op/evenstart.asp>.

NOVEMBER 17–19, 2004

CA Association for Leaders of Career Preparation 16th Annual Conference

This joint fall conference offers information

and inservice opportunities for those who are responsible for school-to-career activities, technical preparation, and related career preparation programs at the K–adult level. The event helps connect students to life-long learning and achievement by assisting educators in their efforts to integrate academic knowledge with real-life application and work-based learning. Rancho Mirage, CA. Contact Chris Allen, callen@ocde.us, 714/541-5537.

FEBRUARY 3–5

Annual Cal-TASH Conference: "You're Gonna Love This . . ."

This conference—for parents, consumers, educators, adult service providers, and others concerned about the quality of life for individuals with disabilities—includes workshop sessions and speakers on systems change and inclusive education. The three days will focus on best practices for inclusion, assistive technology, curriculum access, universal design, whole school reform, self-determination, developing advocacy skills, networking, supporting individuals with disabilities at home and at their place of employment, and more. Manhattan Beach, CA. Contact Lori Haney at 805/964-5822 to register, or email cal-tash@sbceo.org for more information.

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Supporting the Transition Process

Our son Chad is a 22-year-old with severe language delays as well as moderate gross and fine motor challenges. Though he lacks the ability to express himself through language or written words, he is an insightful, fun-loving, artistic young man who found a means of expression that is truly a gift.

Getting the diagnosis

Chad was diagnosed with—we're not sure. We've been told by doctors that he has some autistic-like behaviors, yet in many ways he is not autistic. We've also been told he has a form of genetic aphasia, which is the loss of language skills without a known reason.

My husband and I were at a loss until we met Chad's preschool teacher in Maryland. This teacher, Sherry, had a sibling with special needs, and though she was young, she gave us some sage advice: Get as educated as possible to insure that your son is given the best chance to be all that he can be. She said our focus needed to be Chad's strengths. She also told us to take life one day at a time and to expect both winning days and days when we'd need to regroup. Little did we know at the time how perfectly Sherry prepared us for the years ahead.

Meeting IEP Challenges

Challenges in Chad's education came in the IEP (Individualized Education Program) process, and they came early. Frustration and uncertainty were all too common, although learning the law around special education rights provided us with some reassurance and confidence. Not surprisingly, successes seemed easier in Chad's elementary years. With middle school, the academic curriculum became more intense, as did resistance from teachers to include Chad in general education classrooms.

All of my education, research, and experience could not have prepared us for middle school. Though I worked hard to

find the "right program" for our son, I often found myself coming up against a brick wall, held up by the determination of many teachers who did not think my son's placement in general education classes was appropriate. I agreed that,



Chad with his mother, displaying his art work

without support or accommodations made for the modification of the standard curriculum, it would be difficult for our son to be successful.

Despite what the law says about the rights of all students to be educated in the least restrictive environment, in the early nineties the only way a student with special needs could be included in a general education class at my son's middle school was if the teacher "allowed"

him to be in the class. Even then, teachers more often than not would continue to teach to the rest of the class as if Chad were not there, providing no accommodations to assist him in learning from the standard curriculum. It seemed that middle school was completely lacking in classes where a student with disabilities—mild or severe—could ever be successful. And as I sat through IEP meetings, I would be reminded by most of his teachers of what Chad could not do.

Finding the right approach

But I was a mother. I wasn't there to be told what my son couldn't do! I wanted to focus on Chad's strengths. The negative response I was getting at the IEPs made me become even more determined to become a better advocate for my son.

I knew that I was the only one I could change, and so I chose a different tack: I worked on establishing strong, positive relationships with each teacher. I visited each classroom and found out what could and couldn't be done. We started by determining what would be an effective way for Chad to do reports for classes. We all agreed that he could use visual symbols to represent words he couldn't say. We also used books on audio tapes so

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