Transitions: Toward a Beloved Community for All

By the Honorable Tony Coelho

The late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., once wrote, “We are not makers of history. We are made by history.” In speaking out against racism, segregation, and indifference to injustice, Dr. King offered humanity a hope for a more inclusive world, one where all people were treated with respect and afforded equal rights and opportunities. He called this vision a “beloved community.”

As we reflect on how to improve the transition process for students with disabilities and prepare them for life after high school, understanding the historical context is crucial in our work to emancipate our students. My hope is to further a dialogue about ways we can revolutionize transition to realize a beloved community of the twenty-first century.

Within my lifetime, children who were born with cognitive and physical disabilities were kept away from the public eye—separated from their communities and even their families. Medical professionals counseled families to send disabled children away to state-funded institutions. The families were led to believe that their children would be cared for by professionals who were better trained and in facilities that were better equipped to serve their children’s needs. In the 1950s, families and service providers advocated for reforming institutions. When reform stalled, they advocated for more home and community-based services, but they did not receive much public or political support. It took shocking exposés like Burton Blatt’s 1966 Christmas in Purgatory¹ and Bill Baldini’s 1968 mini-series Suffer the Little Children² to expose harsh truths about our nation’s long-accepted segregation and abuse of people with disabilities.

The disability rights movement has methodically removed barriers to the equal rights and dignity of people with disabilities. But this work required perseverance, as it took 27 federal court cases following the P.A.R.C. and Mills decisions³ before public

(2) Portions of Baldini’s series can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YG33HvIKOgQ
(3) In 1971, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (P.A.R.C.) brought against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania the first right-to-education suit in the country. The Mills class action lawsuit, which expanded the impact of the P.A.R.C. case beyond children with developmental disabilities, was filed on behalf of seven school-age children in the Washington, DC, area who had been denied placement in a public educational program because of alleged disabilities. For more information, see http://www.rootedinrights.org/15321-revision-v1/
Letter from the State Director

One of the greatest joys of the job as state director is one that was not in the job description. It is a joy I feel often, when I have the honor of engaging with a family, a student, a teacher, my own incredible staff here at the California Department of Education, and especially the three historical and powerful individuals who generously contributed to this issue of The Edge: Tony Coelho, Joe Xavier, and Christina Mills. Despite each coming from different generations, locations, and life experiences, their lives are connected through a common thread of disability and the pursuit of human rights.

The Honorable Tony Coelho takes us back through history to reflect on the plight of those who dreamed before us. As the principal author of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), he laid the foundation from which we continue to build and be inspired. He challenges this generation by reminding us that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “offered humanity a hope for a more inclusive world, one where all people were treated with respect and afforded equal rights and opportunities. He called this vision a “beloved community.”

Joe Xavier, the brilliant and passionate director of the Department of Rehabilitation, is in relentless pursuit of high expectations and opportunity for individuals with disabilities. He has helped to craft a higher bar through his unwavering support and vision of competitive integrated employment in California, which is pushing K–12 education to “up its game” from goals of “positive postsecondary outcomes” to “competitive integrated employment opportunities” for students with disabilities. Joe writes about the cultural shift that needs to occur and that will allow each student to realize his or her greatest opportunity: “It’s the belief that we need to create the tide that raises all boats, and the realization that raising every boat, sometimes one at a time and just a little bit at a time, is what will get us there. It’s the personal satisfaction that comes from doing just that.”

Christina Mills defines resilience, perseverance, and grit. Her role of mother is only one of a myriad of life opportunities and challenges she has embraced. After the loss of her beloved daughter Olivia, Christina’s own strength and resolve were tested. I predict she will emerge as one of the most hailed disability rights advocates of her generation. In her article in this issue of The Edge, Christina details how her “education began in a segregated school in Vista, California, a few years after the Section 504 sit-in, when people with disabilities took over the Federal Building in San Francisco for nearly a month, advocating for disability civil rights.” Tony Coelho was in Congress at this same time writing the ADA.

It is impossible not to see the thread that connects the lives and experiences of these three unique and talented public servants. It is through positive role models, high expectations, intentional mapping to employment from early childhood, and the relentless pursuit of equitable opportunities for each student in California that we create the potential for all people to realize their dreams. In a time of great unrest and division in our nation, California is fortunate to house visionaries who not only believe in the rights and talents of all people, they stand up for them. As I look to the end of my first year as state director, I sit in awe of the spirit, intention, and relentless perseverance of those in this arena and am inspired.

— Kristin Wright
**School Standards: A Backwards Map to Living-Wage Employment**

The Internet is crowded with lists of what employers want in the people they hire. From Forbes to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, nearly every one of these lists places three skills among its top five: (1) communication, (2) teamwork/collaboration, and (3) critical thinking/problem-solving. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) confirms the importance of these skills but writes, “Despite overwhelming evidence of their benefit, these skills are not always systematically incorporated into curriculum and instruction, assessment, or professional development” in schools.

**California’s Standards**

California is an exception. The state has seamlessly embedded these very skills and qualities into its 2013 standards for every grade level from kindergarten through grade twelve. In their introduction to the *California Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, California State School Board President Mike Kirst and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson write that these standards are designed to build “critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, and communication. They set another bold precedent to improve the academic achievement of California’s students . . . fulfilling California’s vision that all students graduate from our public school system as lifelong learners and have the skills and knowledge necessary to be ready to assume their position in our global economy.”

**Standards and Students with Disabilities**

This vision includes children with disabilities. The robust alignment of these standards with skills that are central to securing living-wage employment furthers the importance and value of providing students with disabilities rigorous instruction in the standards, to the fullest extent possible and as early as possible. The fact that the standards for these three skills are in place as soon as a child enters school is as important as the skills themselves, particularly for children with disabilities. When those things that a person needs to know and be able to do to be successful in life are given early and focused attention, the child’s development and lifespan outcomes are improved and enhanced; that early focus lays a foundation for a future of opportunities.

In California and nationally, students with disabilities have not historically fared well after leaving the K–12 system. “As of January 2012, only 20 percent of people with disabilities were either working a paid job or seeking employment in the national labor force, compared to 69 percent of the general population,” according to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. In related statistics, “25 percent of people with disabilities live in poverty, with average annual incomes at less than $15,000.”

California’s standards may be a harbinger of better possibilities and improved postsecondary outcomes for these students—especially with the increasing numbers of local education agencies (LEAs) using a multitiered system of support (MTSS) framework as their organizing principle. MTSS ensures that more students with disabilities have access to universally designed general education instruction in the core standards. And those standards in California are designed to prepare each student for competitive integrated employment and authentic participation in his or her community.

**Clear Focus**

“Easier said than done,” some may counter. Even proponents of inclusive education and the same rigorous standards for students with and without disabilities agree that the work of preparing all students for competitive employment, independent living, and adult life is often not easy. And for good reason. Every child carries his or her own unique set of talents, propensities, and challenges. Children with disabilities are no different—and they also have a disability. Additionally compounding the task is the wide and varied range of disability types—deafness, blindness, orthopedic impairment, learning disability, intellectual disability, autism, attention deficits, and more—along with the broad continuum of severity within each type. And then some students have multiple disabilities. Out of this world of difference, potential, and need explodes an almost unlimited set of possibilities for desirable postsecondary outcomes, requiring an enormous amount of flexibility and creative thinking on the part of parents and educators.

But three things remain: the need to communicate, to get along with others, and to solve problems. Viewed through this lens, the potential complications become if not easier to address then at least clearly in focus.

Working from that certainty of what every student needs to be able to do in order to move successfully into adult life, California’s standards provide a

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1. RTI: Perspectives and Resources. Iris Center. [https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti01-overview/cresource/q2/p04](https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti01-overview/cresource/q2/p04). See also “Why Is Early Intervention So Critical.” [https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti01-overview/cresource/q2/p04](https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti01-overview/cresource/q2/p04)


(School Standards, continued on page 4)
(School Standards, continued from page 3)
clear roadmap to success, starting in 
kindergarten and progressing in a 
developmentally appropriate manner 
through twelfth grade. In California, 
“Grade-specific K–12 standards in 
reading, writing, speaking, listening, and 
language translate the broad (and, for 
the earliest grades, seemingly distant) aims 
of the CCR [college and career readiness] 
standards into attainable and age-
appropriate terms.”
As it positions these skills as the 
backbone of all other studies, the 
estate employs comprehension and 
collaboration as themes that guide the 
remaining standards across the grade 
span, as students prepare for and 
participate “effectively in a range of 
conversations and collaborations with 
diverse partners, building on others’ 
ideas and expressing their own clearly 
and persuasively” as they “gather, 
comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and 
summarize information and ideas . . . to 
answer questions [and] solve problems.”
Communicating, collaborating, 
thinking critically, and solving 
problems.

An Eye on the Future
Students are going to buy into none 
of this, however, if they’re not engaged. 
Research about the importance of 
engagement reinforces what many 
parents and educators know to be 
common sense: students learn more, 
achieve more, are happier, and look 
forward to coming to school when 
they are engaged in their classes and 
their studies. One way to secure this 
engagement, according to John Merris-
Coots from the California Career 
Resource Network (CalCRN) program at 
the California Department of Education, 
is to help students develop an eye to the 
future,4 one that helps them develop a 
clear and ever-present understanding of 
the link between what they are learning 
in school and what they need in order 
to succeed in adult life. He believes that 
“career planning is a central piece of this 
engagement” and that a focus on career 
gives students “the idea that academic 
skills are connected to their life goals. 
This is one of the big crossovers [between 
school and adult life], regardless of 
population.”

The CalCRN has created a set of Career 
and College Readiness Lesson Plans that 
are aligned with the state’s standards and 
that can help educators guide students in 
planning for their life after high school. 
These developmentally appropriate plans 
are available for students in grades five 
through twelve. Their ultimate purpose is 
to help students learn what career options 
are available, which ones would suit them 
well, and how to prepare themselves to 
secure living-wage employment doing 
something they would enjoy and be good 
at. (The CalCRN has also developed an 
online California Career Center “virtual 
counselor” along with the California 
CareerZone career planning Web site for 
parents, teachers, and students. See the 
resources on the right.)

AIR writes, “Every student, including 
those with disabilities, should have 
the option to make informed choices 
about the routes that they take in life” 
and be able to “link academics and 
career preparation more tightly.” The 
lessons from CalCRN give students the 
opportunity to do just that: to reflect on 
and learn about employment options 
and educational opportunities after high

(2007). Experiences That Matter: 
Enhancing Student Learning and Success 
NSSE_2007_Annual_Report/docs/with 
hold/NSSE_2007_Annual_Report.pdf

school, to communicate and collaborate 
with others, to think critically, and to 
solve problems—in effect, to practice the 
very skills, as they are articulated in the 
state’s standards, that students will need 
for success in their future education and 
employment.

Standards are only the beginning. 
But in California they are providing a 
firm foundation for the key skills that 
employers want from every student and 
for any job. 

Resources
California Career Resource Network 
provides career information and training 
materials to middle and high school 
counselors, educators, and administrators 
to ensure that schools can guide and 
instruct students on the education 
requirements necessary for career 
development. The Career and College 
Readiness Lesson Plans are posted on 
the CalCRN Web site: http://www. 
californiaCareers.info

California Career Zone is for 
students of all ages and their parents. 
This interactive career exploration and 
planning site allows students to take 
personal inventories, explore career 
options, learn about colleges and 
other postsecondary education and 
training opportunities: https://www. 
cacareerzone.org

California Career Center is designed 
for middle and high school students 
and their parents. The center serves as 
a virtual counselor by helping students 
explore educational opportunities and 
career options, learn what they need to 
know and be able to do to secure work, 
address challenges (e.g., disabilities, 
documentation status, homelessness), 
and manage money: https://www. 
calcareercenter.org

Impact: Feature Issue on Supporting 
New Career Paths for People with 
Intellectual and Developmental 
Disabilities (2012), from the Institute 
on Community Integration & Research 
and Training Center on Community 
Living, is available at https://ici.umn.edu/ 
products/impact/251/251.pdf
The Importance of Competitive Employment. The Importance of Now.

By Joe Xavier, Director, California Department of Rehabilitation

I have been blind since birth. I am a husband, father, grandfather, and proud contributor to my community. Today I am also the director of the California Department of Rehabilitation, and a staunch believer in the talent and potential of individuals with disabilities. I am often asked what enabled me to get here, to enjoy the opportunities I have been bestowed with.

I was born on the Azores Islands, the only one of eight siblings with a disability, and I grew up working on dairy farms, feeding and milking cows, fixing fences, and irrigating crops.

Who I am and where I am today is because of the expectation people had for me: My parents needed me to work on the farm. My elementary school teacher supported me to play softball—as a pitcher wearing a catcher’s mask. My English teacher’s creativity supported my grades with extra credit earned reciting poetry. The track coach found a way for me to hand off and receive a baton, supporting my participation in relay races. My vocational rehabilitation counselor saw and nurtured the potential I did not believe I had. Simply put, I truly believe my transition and preparation to be an adult, be employed, and earn a living wage—like the preparation for all of my siblings—started almost from day one and was informed and shaped by my experiences and the people around me!

Earning a living wage means I can provide for my family, enjoy my home, and plan for my retirement. It means I benefited immensely from the public assistance of Supplemental Security Income as a pathway to leaving poverty. It means I have a voice in and the great honor of bringing about systems change that will make a difference in the lives of all individuals with disabilities, especially youth.

As a pragmatist, I know that imagining something does not make it come true. But imagination helps us see what is possible. I was the beneficiary of the best imaginations of my family, my teachers, my counselors, and so many others; I know without that I would not be living the American dream! But this is not about my story; it’s about your story. It’s about your best imagination and translating that into belief and then into action. So it’s also about your belief in your own potential and in the potential of those you are privileged to serve and work alongside.

I am particularly passionate about competitive integrated employment (CIE), where employees with and without disabilities are integrated and paid the same competitive wage for similar work. It means “real work for real pay in the real world.” It means the basic decency of fair compensation.

As a director, I am often asked what motivates me in this work, what fuels this passion. It’s my own extended family members—Troy, Eddie, and Kurt—who but for lack of expectation could have enjoyed competitive integrated employment and the independence and dignity that come with it. It’s also the letters from people with disabilities who would benefit from CIE and who share their stories, who have achieved employment, who see themselves on the true path to independence and equality. It’s the belief that we need to create the tide that raises all boats, and the realization that raising every boat, sometimes one at a time and just a little bit at a time, is what will get us there.

It’s the personal satisfaction that comes from doing just that. It’s the burning desire within that will not quit until every single individual with a disability has the same opportunities I was afforded!

The Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) has a number of initiatives underway to support youth with disabilities to attain a living wage job (see the list on the next page) and CIE. These initiatives place us at a pivotal time in our history. All of us—family members, employment teams, individuals with disabilities, and those of us in authority—should feel the daunting weight of the moment and the challenges before us. We must establish ambitious goals, improve existing practices, and identify what to lose and what to keep—what we must let go of to make room for the new.

When I consider the obstacles and risks that we will encounter as things change, I have found that reflecting on history is a great motivator: moments such as 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act created an incentive for employers to hire people with disabilities to attain a living wage job (see the list on the next page) and CIE. These initiatives place us at a pivotal time in our history. All of us—family members, employment teams, individuals with disabilities, and those of us in authority—should feel the daunting weight of the moment and the challenges before us. We must establish ambitious goals, improve existing practices, and identify what to lose and what to keep—what we must let go of to make room for the new.

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(Employment, continued on page 6)
sixties, when people with disabilities were moved from being warehoused in asylums to living in our communities. The nineties welcomed standards for digital access and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which declared that people with disabilities have the same civil rights afforded all citizens.

In 1938 when virtually no jobs existed for people with disabilities, segregated settings paying subminimum wage provided employment; since then, we have not only continued employment, we began moving toward competitive employment. Our task today is to continue the employment, to advance the competitive opportunities, and to do both in integrated settings. Our future should ensure informed choice and options.

As I contemplate the work before us, I often reflect on other pivotal points in history and ask myself, “Where would we be had the good folks of the time not pressed on?” We must press on. Let’s dare imagine what our future can be, imagine the world we want to live in 30 years from now, imagine a time when our systems see each individual to serve and each individual sees no system.

Let’s offer our best imagination, keep the hope so we can share our hope with those we serve. Our work is done when we are out of business because every individual with a disability is employed, independent, and enjoying equality in our community and in our society. Thank you for your courage to press on, your passion to stay committed, and your commitment to bring about the best in our future.

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**Initiatives That Support Living-Wage Employment for Students with Disabilities**

Numerous state and federal initiatives are being designed to support students with disabilities as they prepare for adult life and competitive integrated employment (CIE)—and to ensure that they can take advantage of competitive employment opportunities. These initiatives emphasize collaboration, coordination, and partnership among agencies, “moving away from departmentalization” and reflecting how “the whole can be a greater sum than the parts,” says Joe Xavier, director of the California Department of Rehabilitation. The catalyst for these initiatives comes in part, says Xavier, from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is “designed to strengthen and improve our nation’s public workforce system and help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers.”

The following list highlights some of the ongoing efforts to ensure that postsecondary opportunities and living-wage employment are available for all students with disabilities after they leave high school.


**The CIE Blueprint**—Employing Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and Developmental Disabilities in California: “Real Work for Real Pay in the Real World”—is the product of interagency collaboration among The Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), the California Department of Education (CDE), and the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to “jointly identify ways to increase competitive integrated employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.” The blueprint describes initiatives that represent “existing successes, that will be built upon utilizing available resources, as some of the first exemplary, effective, and emerging ("Triple E") practices intended for statewide replication.”

The blueprint also focuses on how to phase out the payment of subminimum wages in state-funded employment; develop meaningful outcome measures and improve data collection and sharing among agencies; and improve interagency coordination, including referrals between agencies and the continuity of transition planning from school to work. In general, the document identifies ways to expand services from each department to achieve CIE for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. With this goal in mind, the blueprint establishes benchmarks and activities for CIE advancement and, writes Xavier, “identifies concrete steps for making CIE the focus of today and, more importantly, the reality of real work for real pay in the real world!” For more information, go to [http://www.chhs.ca.gov/Pages/Competitive-Integrated-Employment-(CIE).aspx](http://www.chhs.ca.gov/Pages/Competitive-Integrated-Employment-(CIE).aspx)

**DOR is working with the CDE and local education agencies (LEAs) to provide Pre-Employment Transition**
Services to students with disabilities. These services—job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling related to postsecondary opportunities, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy training—can be accessed through the Transition Partnership Programs and WorkAbility.

• Transition Partnership Program (TPP) is a joint project of the DOR and CDE to build partnerships between select LEAs and their local DOR district. The TPP provides vocational services designed to successfully transition students with disabilities to meaningful employment.

• WorkAbility I, a competitive grant administered by CDE and implemented by LEAs, provides comprehensive pre-employment training, work experience placement, and follow-up for high school students who receive special education services and who are making the transition from school to work, independent living, and postsecondary education or training. During the 2014–2015 school year, CDE directed schools not to use WorkAbility I funds for supporting work in subminimum wage settings. For more about WorkAbility, go to http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/wrkablty1.asp

The DOR, in collaboration with the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, launched in 2010–2011 C2C, a College to Career pilot project for individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism. The program has since expanded to several campuses throughout the state and provides pre-vocational and vocational training, campus supports, work experiences and internships, and job development and placement services that prepare students for competitive integrated employment. The following community colleges have C2C programs:

• College of Alameda. Go to http://alameda.peralta.edu/dsps/
• Fresno Community College. Go to http://www.scccd.edu
• North Orange County Community College District. Go to https://www.semel.ucla.edu/opendoors/program/school-continuing-education-0
• Sacramento City College. Go to http://www.scc.losrios.edu/college2career/
• San Diego County Community College District. Go to https://www.semel.ucla.edu/opendoors/program/college-career-san-diego-community-college-district
• Santa Rosa Junior College. Go to https://drd.santarosa.edu/c2c-program-overview
• Shasta College. Go to http://www.shastacollege.edu/student%20Services/DSPS/Pages/College-to-Career.aspx

• DOR has expanded the CAPromise initiative (California Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income), which is designed to increase economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities in California. Funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, CAPromise is a collaborative effort led by the DOR in partnership with the Employment Development Department, CDE, DDS, Department of Social Services, Department of Health Care Services, and San Diego State University Interwork Institute. The intermediate goal of CAPromise is to improve the way services and supports are provided to and coordinated for children who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and their families. The ultimate goal is to secure improved outcomes for these children: supporting them to complete postsecondary education and to gain job training so that as adults they can obtain competitive integrated employment that may result in long-term reductions in their reliance on SSI. For more information, go to https://www.capromise.org/

• Federal CIE initiatives include efforts at the U.S. Department of Labor’s advisory committee on CIE, the vocational rehabilitation requirements of the WIOA, and services to those in subminimum wage settings that ensure that these individuals remain aware of the possibility of pursuing CIE.

• The Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, and the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities have made significant investments in helping states increase competitive integrated employment opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities through an Employment First Policy. California’s Employment First Policy was signed into law in 2013, giving opportunities for competitive integrated employment “the highest priority for working age individuals with developmental disabilities.”

• Centers for Medicaid Services are now required to provide community-based services, which will make it more possible for individuals with disabilities to engage in living-wage employment; and the Department of Developmental Services is addressing CIE as a priority.


5. For more information, read New Restrictions on Subminimum Wage Under WIOA: Requirements and Opportunities for State IDD Agencies at https://dmh.mo.gov/dd/progs/docs/selwioifactsheet.pdf
As we revisit the topic of transition, I call your attention to the fact that the transition process, in all its pitfalls and promises, was not imagined as a checkmark on a to-do list. The very notion of transition planning grew out of a history of the disability rights movement’s resistance against ableism and segregation, against paternalism and pity. Transition planning aimed to pre-think successful ways for people with disabilities to go to work, go to school, and be connected in their communities. It was born out of what I call the “Inclusion Revolution” and the radical assertion that people with disabilities want to work, become taxpayers, and contribute to society; and that they have a right to live meaningful, quality everyday lives just like everyone else.

With an increase in public recognition, the transition process has undergone a number of improvements in the past 30 years:

- The IDEA of 1990 required planning for post-school transition at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for all students with disabilities. In 1997, President Bill Clinton expanded IDEA to apply the same high academic standards for all children and emphasized that transition planning must include related services necessary to achieve the activities stated in the transition plan.
- In 1998, President Clinton signed into law the bipartisan Work Incentives Improvement Act, which allows people with disabilities to maintain their Medicare or Medicaid coverage when they go to work.
- President George W. Bush’s New Freedom Initiative sought to promote full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of society.
- In 2004, IDEA emphasized the requirement for education agencies to prepare students with disabilities for critically important activities after leaving school. These activities include attending college, training for employment, getting a job, living independently, and participating in the life of the community.
- Under President Barack Obama, the Department of Labor supported a national movement called Employment First, a framework for “systems change that is centered on the premise that all citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment and community life.” There are now 23 states that participate in Employment First.

Yet, despite these notable advancements, more work remains to be done.

For the students with disabilities who go on to college, some struggle to graduate, not due to their cognitive abilities but as a result of their difficulties navigating postsecondary education without IEPs and their struggles forming the social support system common among thriving graduates. According to a study by the A. J. Drexel Autism Institute, as many as two-thirds of high-school seniors eligible for a transition plan do not have one. Our failure to provide young people with a transition plan that would enable them to gain needed social skills and independence restricts their opportunity to realize their potential and pursue their greatest aspirations.

While we know that the employment rate for youth with disabilities ages 19–23 is only 28 percent, we must also recognize that, as a group, youth with disabilities on the autism spectrum and those with depression experience even greater unemployment than youth with other types of disabilities.

We must also recognize that exposing young people to job training programs is insufficient without the existence of actual
jobs. At the same time, we must watch—and do what we can to ensure—that the jobs to which our young people transition allow them to earn a livable wage. Pope Francis has famously said, “Power, money, culture do not give us dignity. Work, honest work, gives us dignity.” At the same time, he has admonished employers who exploit workers by paying them near-slave wages. To secure the dignity of all people with disabilities, it is time to end subminimum wages.

Finally, realizing a more inclusive society will require us to confront the myth that children with disabilities are best served outside of their communities by someone other than their loved ones. Except for instances of severe emotional or physical abuse, separation is never equitable nor warranted. Not only does segregation have a significant impact on our youth—and eventual adults—but it’s also contradictory to transition planning. It’s a contradiction to send children away for their education, and then wonder how to help them form friendships when they return to their neighborhoods. We can’t limit their opportunities for inclusion—through segregation—only to then force them to compete for limited Medicaid waivers when they need to be reintegrated with their communities. This is neither sustainable, nor is it moral for the education system to shift the responsibility for integration and inclusion back to the medical system. We are better than this. The time is right to begin a transition planning process that is person-centered and family-centered. When we provide students with disabilities the same equal educational opportunities that are offered to everyone else, we prepare them to become global citizens of the twenty-first century, to work, to contribute to society, and to lead fulfilling lives.

When all of our community members are given the opportunity to flourish, we can then claim to have a truly beloved community. Don’t wait for the next set of regulations. Start now by doing what you can. Join the Inclusion Revolution!

The Honorable Tony Coelho is a retired U.S. Congressman from California, a former House of Representatives Majority Whip, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman, and principal author of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Innovations: Technology That Supports Successful Transition

Nothing is more critical at any important juncture in a person’s life than communicative competence—allowing a person to express what he or she needs, wants, and knows—and access to physical places and to information. The last quarter century has seen astonishing advances in the development of technological devices and software platforms that allow for both of these things. Augmentative and alternative communication systems, hearing aids and implants, mobility technologies, social and emotional supports, telehealth tools, and more—all support students with disabilities as they participate in school. Technology also makes it increasingly more possible for teachers to differentiate instruction in the general education classroom and so teach the same content standards to all students.

Research and design advances continue to improve even low-tech devices—corrective lenses, canes and walkers, and pencil grips—as well as such mid-range technologies as talking spell-checkers, amplifiers, and electronic organizers. At the highest level, wheelchairs are becoming increasingly more sophisticated (some can climb stairs!), eye- or head-movement-operated systems allow people with severe neurological disorders to communicate and operate computers, and glasses are being developed to magnify and contrast the slightest residual vision and so allow people with significant loss of sight to gain enough visual information to maintain independence.

The range of options is voluminous. To learn more, visit the following Web sites:

Human identity is rarely simple or one dimensional. There’s the teenager from Uganda who is white, transgender, and a boxer; the African American man from Minnesota who is Jewish and teaches art; the 85-year-old woman with a disability who trains problem horses. “Intersectionality” is the sociological theory that explores the interaction of multiple human dimensions: how a person who identifies with or belongs to more than one category—race, gender, age, ethnicity, and disability—can face several and sometimes conflicting experiences as a result of the intersection of those identities.

The term was coined more than 30 years ago by Kimberlé Crenshaw, currently professor of law at Columbia and UCLA, “to describe how race and gender could intersect as forms of oppression.” Her research focuses on intersectionality and black women, but the term has expanded in its meaning and has specific implications for California’s students with disabilities.

The state made national news with its Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), a piece of landmark legislation that eliminated many strict funding categories, identified three subgroups of students who are at risk for school failure, and now provides additional money for these subgroups also have a disability. However, special education money was not factored into the LCFF funding picture; so how this intersectionality will play out in terms of funding, services, and support for students with disabilities remains to be seen. One particular challenge lies in the variations among the current funding distribution patterns for special education. Specific money is earmarked for the supports and services that students with disabilities need in order to benefit from their education, and this money flows through Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs). But some SELPAs receive more money per pupil than others, and the funding patterns in general run “counter to LCFF principles of transparency, local control, and accountability.” The LCFF has made important inroads toward ensuring that students in the state are given the intensity of instruction they need in order to be ready for further education and/or employment after high school. California is not finished, though, in refining its approach to making funding in particular, and education in general, more efficient and equitable for every student.

A significant number of students in these subgroups also have a disability. However, special education money was not factored into the LCFF funding picture; so how this intersectionality will play out in terms of funding, services, and support for students with disabilities remains to be seen. One particular challenge lies in the variations among the current funding distribution patterns for special education. Specific money is earmarked for the supports and services that students with disabilities need in order to benefit from their education, and this money flows through Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs). But some SELPAs receive more money per pupil than others, and the funding patterns in general run “counter to LCFF principles of transparency, local control, and accountability.” The LCFF has made important inroads toward ensuring that students in the state are given the intensity of instruction they need in order to be ready for further education and/or employment after high school. California is not finished, though, in refining its approach to making funding in particular, and education in general, more efficient and equitable for every student. As it turns its focus to special education finance, the state is addressing the challenge of meeting the sometimes complex needs of those students whose intersectional status encompasses disability and the explicit LCFF categories—an overlap that may put them at risk for unintentional discrimination in service and placement. One unified system of education that efficiently and equitably addresses the needs of all students is the goal; how this vision can accommodate the intersectional status of students with disabilities just may lead to one more landmark reform.

4. Ibid. Hill, Warren, Murphy, Ugo, & Pathak.

Learning from Others

Don’t miss the free Webinars sponsored by Project READ. These online events will explore strategies for improving reading and English Language Arts (ELA) for all students—including students with disabilities, English language learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students—and will be hosted by schools that have found success in teaching reading, engaging teams, monitoring progress, and involving families. Additional information will be available on the Project READ website in early August 2017 and will include a list of Project READ’s exemplar sites that will welcome visits from school teams interested in improving student progress. Bookmark http://www.caspdgo.org
Students at John Muir Charter School in Grass Valley are learning how to read a set of electrical plans. In Petaluma, they are working on habitat restoration, and in Salinas they are practicing culinary skills. These are not high school vocational education classes, and the students are not suburban sophomores. They are young adults, ages 16 to 25, “who have not been successful in traditional schools,” says RJ Guess, chief executive officer of John Muir Charter Schools. The students are learning job skills while pursuing a high school diploma. Most will graduate and transition to the workforce or continue their education.

Like John Muir, all charter schools in California are public schools, tuition free, and open to all students, including students with disabilities. Parents, teachers, or community members initiate charters when they seek more choice in the types of educational opportunities offered within the public school system. The charters have operational autonomy but must follow state and federal laws, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requirement that a formal transition plan be in place for students with disabilities prior to their sixteenth birthday.

But educators at these schools are seeing the need for transition planning both before and, for some students, well after age 16.

It may not officially be called transition planning, but when academic and behavioral issues are identified and appropriate interventions employed early in a child’s schooling, “by the time they are in high school, they have resolved or minimized academic and social deficits” and are better prepared for a successful transition to postsecondary life, says Ginese Quann, El Dorado Charter SELPA director. And for those students who leave high school without a diploma or certificate of completion, charters like John Muir and Oakland’s Civicorps offer a second chance to acquire not only a diploma, but also the skills to secure stable, living-wage employment.

**Starting Before Age 16**

There are more than 1,200 charter schools in the state; nearly one quarter of them operate under the statewide support of the El Dorado SELPA; students with disabilities comprise 10.8 percent of the enrollment, which is comparable to the state overall. For those students, says Associate Superintendent David Toston, “transition planning should start in middle school, getting students to think about what they want to do, and it should include basic independent living skills and how to advocate effectively for themselves.” Quann agrees that starting in middle school is important “so they can take courses in high school that align with what they want to do.”

Transition planning in these schools is ongoing and uses data that is collected on the student’s needs, interests, and progress. El Dorado’s procedural guidelines for transition planning suggest that a career exploration or interest inventory is useful for students in grades nine and ten; “for an older student, a vocational skills assessment is more appropriate.” When transition becomes part of a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP), the student must be invited to the IEP meeting. “Ideally,” says Quann, “the student should lead the meeting,” which helps him or her develop self-advocacy and leadership skills. The transition plan includes “appropriate, measurable postsecondary goals . . . and the transition services (including course of study) needed to assist the student in reaching those goals.” Each year’s annual goals—skills for the student to acquire, for example, or classes to take—should be in support of the postsecondary goals, and the guidelines stress the need for goals to be results oriented, to “identify an outcome rather than a process.” For example, an annual goal for Austin, who wants to be a police officer, might be: “In order to have the writing skills necessary for police work, Austin will compose all written work at a minimum tenth-grade writing level.” And his transition plan might say: “Austin will receive a diploma and attend Folsom Lake Community College to obtain his associate’s degree prior to entering the police academy.”

Such transition plans, Toston says, are designed to have “tangible outcomes for the student; you’re not just complying and checking all the appropriate boxes.”

Most of the students who are part of the El Dorado Charter SELPA will graduate and move into the next phase of their lives, be it work, education, and/or independent living. But for too many students with disabilities in California, robust and effective transition planning does not exist, and their transition amounts to dropping out of school without a diploma. They may end up unemployed, homeless, and living in...
poverty. Some are young parents of young children; some spend time in prison.

Those who leave high school without a diploma or certificate of completion and who are willing to invest in themselves and their futures, however, may find their way to one of the John Muir Charter Schools or to Civicorps. These are schools designed specifically to serve young adults who have not completed high school in a traditional manner. Both offer a second chance to acquire not only a diploma but also the skills to secure stable, living-wage employment. While the two programs differ in significant aspects, both have rigorous academic and job training programs while also offering individualized counseling and supportive services to all students.

**Civicorps**

At Civicorps, part of the Oakland SELPA, approximately 150 students ranging in age from 18 to 26 enroll each year. Most live in the greater Oakland area, and 40 percent have learning disabilities or are dealing with emotional issues.

Every new student, with and without disabilities, has an interview with Resource Specialist Lauren Hoernig. “They tell us if they have any history of special education,” Hoernig says. “If they self-identify, we will get copies of their records.” Those records, in Hoernig’s experience, are often old and incomplete. “The IEPs I see are mostly from eighth or ninth grade, and very few students have transition plans.” Even if they exist, “those transition plans really change when they come here,” says Deputy Director Tessa Nicholas.

These plans probably change for a number of reasons. But lack of a clear and concrete goal for the future is often one of them. According to the College and Career Readiness and Success Center, it is important for students with disabilities to have occupationally specific education programs with appropriate instructional and support services. Many K–12 programs don’t provide these things. Civicorps does. All students begin their schooling at Civicorps by taking a career pathways class and writing a personal goal plan that includes goals for career, education, and life.

Then they begin the first phase of the Civicorps program: 14 weeks of academic classes in mathematics, reading, and language usage based on the California State Standards, along with training in such skills as punctuality, team building, conflict resolution, and financial literacy. “There’s a lot of coaching, a lot of one-on-one help,” says Head of School TyFahra Singleton. Hoernig has two instructional aides, “and one of us is in the classroom all the time,” she says. “We work with the [general education] teachers to provide academic support to anyone who needs it.” After that first 14 weeks, students begin their job training. School doesn’t end, however; students attend classes two nights a week, always moving toward graduation while earning $12.86 an hour working at Civicorps’ own recycling business, on environmental management projects with such partners as East Bay Regional Parks and East Bay Municipal Utilities District, or at other area employers.

Although the students enroll as a class, they progress at an individual pace. The program can be completed in as few as nine months while “a student who needs more support might take a year and a half,” says Nicholas. An impressive 72 percent of Civicorps students will graduate with a high school diploma. They are tracked formally for a year after graduation, and 73 percent are employed or enrolled in college one year later. At Civicorps many have found the guidance and support they lacked in their truncated K–12 schooling. Singleton says she wishes the students had been allowed “a little more productive struggle” during their prior education. “They give up too easily. They won’t have IEPs and the same level of support after they leave school, and they haven’t been trained to work through problems.” Adds Nicholas: “Many say nobody cared. They need people who value them. Having someone seeing and believing in you creates an internal motivation.”

**John Muir**

John Muir Charter Schools, based in Grass Valley and part of the Nevada County Office of Education, serve 1,400 students at 50 school sites throughout the state, the majority of them in southern California. Eight percent are students with disabilities.

Unlike Civicorps, students do not apply directly to John Muir. They first contact one of the school’s partner agencies—the California Conservation Corps, a local conservation corps, YouthBuild, or Workforce Investment Act programs—and if they don’t have a high school diploma, they are automatically enrolled, says Guess.

In its academic program, John Muir aims to show growth of student learning in seven areas: reading and writing effectively; obtaining key life skills; appreciating history, geography, and current events; understanding government processes; understanding and applying mathematical concepts; applying scientific concepts and skills; and realizing their own special interests and talents.

The classes are small and “teachers accommodate all learning styles and needs,” says Greta Youngblood, academic manager at Greta Youngblood, academic manager at Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB), a partner agency that serves Marin and Sonoma counties. Because there are fewer students in northern California, credentialed special education teachers are not John Muir employees but rather are hired through outside agencies and called “tutors” when they visit school sites. They offer support to all students, with and without disabilities. “In many
traditional school settings there's still a stigma attached to special education,” says Guess. “We don't have that.” Students graduate whenever they earn the credits they need. About two-thirds of the students with disabilities earn a diploma.

Simultaneously they are learning a trade. “We look at what industry sectors our partners focus on and what the growth possibilities are in those sectors,” says Guess. He names agriculture, natural resources, and energy as well as “recession proof” professions like plumbing, electrical work, and food service. Professionals in the electrical, construction, and culinary industries are among the instructors at John Muir job sites.

At the Petaluma job site students are pulling up invasive species and planting trees along the Petaluma River. They can earn certification in such skills as using power tools and operating heavy machinery. To attract more students, CCNB Development Director Mark Green says he reaches out to NGOs and places ads in local movie theaters.

Teresa Talbott is special education director at John Muir. As at Civicorps, if students say they had an IEP before leaving school, she will access those records. “Then we look for where we can offer more support. How is the IEP going to help them access the curriculum they still need to get a diploma?”

She says that the transition plans she sees are often not skills based. “I'd like to see one where the student was clearly involved, understands and envisions his life goals, and sees the connection between the goal and the steps to achieving it.” If, for example, a student wants to be a car mechanic and get a certificate at a vocational school, Talbott advises looking at the application, seeing what's needed, and developing a plan to work toward that goal—a very focused kind of backwards mapping. For Talbott, the best time to begin exploring a student's interests is fifth or sixth grade. “Get them out to experience that career; have a mentor so they can see why what they are doing now works toward that goal.”

When such plans are in place to help high school students transition to a successful postsecondary life, there may be less need for schools like Civicorps and John Muir. “If we provide appropriate pathways for students, we could go out of business,” says Guess. “What we want is to be put out of business.”

Additional Resources


Transition of Students With Disabilities to Postsecondary Education: A Guide for High School Educators is at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transitionguide.html#keys

A Closer Look: When to Begin Transition Planning

The Letter of the Law

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to support a student with disabilities in preparing for transition from the K–12 school system into adult life. Transition service language, according to IDEA, must be included in the IEP “beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child is 16, and updated annually thereafter.” [Section 614(d)(1)(A)(i)]. This is the law. If the student turns 16 before the next scheduled IEP meeting, the IEP team must develop transition service language and identify needed services during the IEP when the student is 15, so that the plan is in effect when the student turns 16.

The Spirit of the Law

While “beginning not later than . . . when the child is 16” is the exact language of the law for formal transition language, planning, and services, the true spirit of effective public education suggests something more robust. Parents (who are a child’s first teacher) and all involved educators best serve each child when they’re attending to what his or her individual strengths and challenges are at their earliest contact with the child. When those strengths and challenges are known, parents and teachers can determine how best to support the child in developing his or her talents and addressing any current and anticipated struggles. Then, by the time the child leaves high school, he or she is ready to enter fully into adult life and realize optimal lifespan outcomes—including continued learning (formally or informally), living-wage employment, community involvement, and independent living to the fullest extent possible.

Getting from Here to There

Two qualities rank consistently in the top five things that employers seek in their new hires: the ability to communicate effectively and the ability to work well with others. It is arguable that verbal/English language arts skills (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking in some form) and social-emotional skills (e.g., controlling feelings and behaviors, building relationships, setting and reaching goals) should be intentionally and concertedly taught at every stage of a child’s development. This focus, in effect, amounts to launching the transition process at the most appropriate moment: at the beginning.
my family had thought was possible for a disabled girl like me.

I consider YLF one of the most important transitional experiences of my life. It’s led me to being the parent advocate I am for my children and for other youth with whom I come in contact through my work at the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers, YO! Disabled and Proud that I co-founded.

Fast forward fifteen years and many educational and personal transitions later. I’m married to a man with a disability. We both have careers in disability rights and have had two beautiful children, who also happened to have disabilities.

We consider transition a part of our family norm. Transitioning as individuals with disabilities is full of variables, but having children who we are responsible for guiding through transition is another experience entirely, and an exciting one. They get to benefit from the experiences of their mom and dad.

**Olivia’s Story**

When our daughter Olivia was born with multiple disabilities, we geared up our parenting knowledge, our energies, and our imagination. We thought about what her life might be like when she started school and made sure we had a plan to get her everything she needed in an environment that would complement our positive disability values. There would be no segregation or pity.

At 18 months Olivia attended three days a week an integrated, school-based program that partnered with the city’s parks and recreation program for typically developing toddlers. Olivia’s Early Intervention Specialist was her non-official one-on-one aide who assisted in making it possible. The arrangement worked. It also set the stage for Olivia’s transition to our neighborhood preschool.

Olivia had every evaluation and assessment you could think of before entering preschool. Her multiple diagnoses led to an easy understanding of how she qualified for services under IDEA, but also led to concerns about whether or not she would be able to thrive in a typical school environment. She was non-verbal, visually impaired, and physically, intellectually, and developmentally disabled; but like her parents, everyone at the local school saw her potential. There was no question about her ability to benefit from attending school in a least restricted environment, which meant time with her typically developing peers as well as her peers with disabilities in a classroom that included push-in services. School provided her with routine, structure, accountability, social interactions, student peers, creative teachers, and educational opportunities. Those teachers pushed Olivia as much as we did at home and believed in the high expectations we had for her. Looking back I’m still astonished that the IEP Team

**When our daughter Olivia was born with multiple disabilities, we geared up our parenting knowledge, our energies, and our imagination.**

supported our mobility goal of allowing Olivia to hold onto her teacher’s or aide’s knees while seated on a rolling stool in the classroom as a way to eventually improve her mobility.

I believe that the proactive, nine-page family report that I wrote on Olivia’s strengths to supplement the professional assessments (which were not as positive) helped everyone understand Olivia’s potential. It was that well-thought-out family report along with the handouts I provided on appropriate and respectful disability language and etiquette that got our girl transitioned from an early intervention program to preschool.

Forward thinking, planning, advocacy, and teamwork is what got Olivia’s IEP team off to a positive start. The bar was set high not just for Olivia but for everyone involved in her success. We entered the process with a positive attitude and found buy-in from the other members of the team when we showed our enthusiasm and belief in our daughter.

Unfortunately, Olivia’s transition to kindergarten didn’t happen. But we were again prepared and began communicating our kindergarten expectations months before her transition meeting. She spent three years in preschool and grew by leaps and bounds. She made eye contact, learned how to request and protest her wants and needs; she learned how to play with others; her dexterity improved dramatically; and she mastered feeding herself. And that original mobility goal paid off; she also learned how to walk independently, pedal a bike, engage in imaginary play, communicate reciprocally—and many other skills that would have benefited her throughout life. Her teachers and providers were always excited to share Olivia’s new accomplishments with me. They would send me emails, talk with me at school functions, and occasionally text me with photos and videos when they could catch her in action. We were a real team.

My advocacy plan was to request a year of transitional kindergarten for her at her annual IEP meeting last year, which would have set her back a year by age but would have better prepared her for the rest of her K–12 education. Then Olivia unexpectedly passed away from a seizure.

**The Point**

When Olivia began preschool I got involved, but not exclusively with the special education program and my daughter’s needs. I realized early on that, as a disabled parent of a disabled student, my level of engagement at her school was going to impact her future and the attitudes of those around her. I wanted to send the message that I cared about my daughter’s education—and her lunch hour, her recess, and her after-school activities. I wanted to send a message that school was a major part of her life, and that kids like her with disabilities deserve the best and are equal to their nondisabled peers. I believe that my volunteer investment in school committees and events made a difference and will pave an
experiences give us perspectives that allow us to use what we’ve gained to serve our children and all children as parent advocates, to share what we know with those who need our support and guidance. Our opinions matter; and when we speak up, we can make a difference.

The role we as parents can play today is very different from what it was 40 years ago. Let us not forget the important role that advocates at that historic sit-in played in paving the way to make possible our current level of involvement; they helped to shape today’s infrastructures and policies. They are a part of what is known today as Disability History.

Let us continue to work towards inclusive educational opportunities for our children by getting involved and by taking advantage of the opportunities before us. Every transition is important and sets the tone of the next. Every step builds on the one before. All of our children deserve the best. ◆

Not everyone is a natural advocate. However, there are organizations across the state and country that offer parents with and without disabilities training in leadership skills and engagement opportunities to further our knowledge and advocacy skills. In the next column are some of my favorite resources. —CM

DREDF: Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund is a leading national civil rights law and policy center directed by individuals with disabilities and parents who have children with disabilities. DREDF’s mission is to advance the civil and human rights of people with disabilities through legal advocacy, training, education, and public policy and legislative development. To access their extensive resources and learn more about their services, go to https://dredf.org

Matrix Parent Network and Resource Center is a parent-operated nonprofit organization that provides direct services to families and support services to other federally funded parent centers. To learn more about Matrix, go to http://www.matrixparents.org and to find a parent center near you, see http://www.parentcenterhub.org/centers-in-region-6/parent-centers-in-california/

Family Voices of California is a collaborative of parent-run centers working to build their capacity to provide families with quality health care for children with special health care needs: http://www.familyvoicesofca.org

For 16 years, the IRIS Center has been a leader in the development of online materials designed to help improve the educational outcomes for all students, especially struggling learners and those with disabilities. With an emphasis on accessibility and interactivity, IRIS online modules, case studies, and activities cover such topics as classroom behavior management, cultural and linguistic diversity, autism spectrum disorder, Universal Design for Learning, and so much more.

IRIS resources address instructional and behavioral challenges and provide practical, evidence-based solutions that teachers can implement in their classrooms. All IRIS resources are available free of charge through the center’s Web site. In addition, IRIS now offers low-cost professional development opportunities through an online PD Hours Store, which features a select and growing assortment of IRIS learning modules and—for the teacher on the go—micro-credentials. For more information about the IRIS Center and its resources, visit https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/ or call the center at 800-831-6134. ◆

1. Local Control Accountability Plans. California’s state PTA has created great resources about the LCAPs. Find them at http://capta.org/focus-areas/lcflcap/. Also see A Parent’s Guide to School Funding: Learning the Fundamentals about LCFF and the LCAP at http://www.familiesinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Parents-Guide-to-School-Funding-LCFF.pdf

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Living Transition

By Christina Mills, Parent Leader and Member of the California Advisory Commission on Special Education

I sit in a unique position. Literally. I was born with a disability and use a stylish chrome wheelchair. I also have two children with disabilities. So the word “transition” is something I’ve been familiar with for as long as I can remember. In fact, life for me has been one continuous transition.

My Story

My education began in a segregated school in Vista, California, a few years after the Section 504 sit-in, when people with disabilities took over the Federal Building in San Francisco for nearly a month, advocating for disability civil rights. I consider myself lucky to have been born during an era when people like me, “disabled people,” were given rights. Not exactly equal rights. But that event in San Francisco led to significant, positive changes for me and my husband—and eventually for our children. Although even positive change never follows a straight line.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act (the law that evolved into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) were both enacted after that civil protest. Because of those federal laws, I was moved out of a segregated school and into a “least restricted environment” public school. It’s been more than 30 years now, and I can still recall what that transition felt like. I remember being told, “You’re better and smarter than the other kids here. That’s why you get to leave.” Those words left me with a lasting bitter taste. They were meant to sound positive. And while they probably left me feeling better about myself than my disabled peers felt about themselves, they also left me feeling different: less disabled but lonely when it came to having disabled friends I could relate to. Those words were damaging and nearly sidetracked my life.

Despite my disabilities and my wheelchair, I didn’t have an IEP or a 504 Plan. I was one of those “in between” students. You know, the generation that was considered “severely disabled” and happy to be mainstreamed, but not the generation recent enough to have a school administration that actually knew what the law meant or how to implement it. Besides, I was from a poor, single-parent family. My mom had little education and didn’t even know we had rights. She thought everyone was just being nice to us.

The turning point came when I was selected to attend the California Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) for Students with Disabilities in 1995. It was the YLF curriculum and the positive disabled role models I met during the program that helped me realize there were laws that protected me. It was the countless conversations with my disabled peers at YLF that made me understand for the first time that I wasn’t alone and that I wasn’t any different from my disabled classmates in the segregated school I left years earlier. It was the first time in my life that I felt okay being me, disabled. In fact, I felt proud and learned that I had a future ahead of me that no one in

(Parent Perspective, continued on page 14)