

TRANSITIONING TO LIFE AFTER SECONDARY SCHOOL

As the new school year begins, it is useful for families and teachers to think about how to make the best of the high school year, especially if this is the final secondary school year. Planning for the change from school to life beyond school should be a secondary school priority.

Teacher and family planning for transition to life after secondary school for students experiencing disability has been a difficult and frustrating process in many instances. To understand this difficult reality and to contribute to creating positive transition planning, the Marsha Forest Centre undertook a study of the planning situation. We interviewed teachers, parents, and students who had experienced transition planning or were now involved in it. As I describe the study and its findings, I will insert comments made by teachers, parents, and students about their experiences and about the book, *Planning for Real Life After School: Ways for Families and Teachers to Plan for Students Experiencing Significant Challenge*, that resulted from our study. People First Ontario and the Canadian Ability Foundation were our partners, and Inclusion Press of Toronto assisted us in publishing and distributing the book.

Our overall finding was that, whereas a few secondary schools and families collaborated closely on planning, this was not the experience of most. As transition from secondary school is the doorway to adult life in the community, the lack of collaborative planning was disturbing.

From what we were told during the interviews, it seemed that families and teachers did not work well together because they did not understand each other's viewpoints. This was the root of the problems we found. They were not a team working together on this important process.

Few parents felt they had any significant participation role. Some were not aware of, or kept informed of, planning. Some were more fortunate in their relationship with the school. Many found the experience negative. Here are a few statements by parents.

- *What is the transition planning process? I have never heard of it.*
- *We have been doing transition planning for high school since my son was in Grade 10. He is 18 now.*
- *I attend the IEP meetings, but I don't say much because they are talking about things I don't understand.*
- *Our school connected us to Community Living to make links before graduation.*
- *I have had no contact at school. There is no parent role.*

Teachers tended to be optimistic regarding the transition planning process, at least from the school's perspective. Various teacher comments indicated that many, but not all parents, were not heavily involved in planning. Most teachers appeared to approach transition planning as their responsibility and to be carried through with only modest family involvement.

- The Special Education Teacher (SERT) who has the student takes the lead hand in coordinating everything.
- It would have to be a collaborative thing with the SERT and student and sometimes the parent to plan the next step after high school.
- There are meetings throughout the year where we meet again with parents and students and we discuss how things are going.
- I think, too, that part with the parents is that we need to get them involved earlier. They need a vision.
- The school that I am at now has a Co-operative Education Program, but it is at a university/college level. So I feel that leaves out a whole segment of our student population who would really benefit from Co-operative Education.

We had planned to write a resource manual that would be like a recipe book for collaborative transition planning. After our interviews, we decided that we had to go back quite a few steps. It was not safe to assume that schools and families had the background to work collaboratively. There was no deliberate plan for teachers to exclude family members and no intention by parents to take responsibility away from teachers. However, there was troublesome mutual misunderstanding in many situations. We needed to describe the ingredients for positive transition planning before we got to trying out the recipe.

We then set about trying to explain the reality of the school situation to the families, and the reality of the family situation to the schools. We put what teachers, parents, and students told us into the book. In fact, we ended up with two versions of the book. One was written at a high school level. The second was written in a plain language format at an elementary level for anyone whose reading skills were modest. We wanted to make certain that our readers would understand us, particularly in the case of students, but also for families whose first language was not English .

The set of books includes descriptions of the situation of schools and families. It also contains a description of a collaborative family-school workshop preparing families and students for transition. Recommendations drawn from what families and teachers told us, and description of person-centered planning strategies that have proven their value in planning for the future of persons experiencing disabilities completed the book.

The last thing we did was to send a draft of the book to all teachers, parents, and students we interviewed. We wanted to use their feedback to evaluate the books and revise them as necessary. We wanted to ensure that those we interviewed had significant input at all levels of what we were doing. Minimal revision was called for. Feedback from teachers, parents, and students was strongly positive with regard to the contribution *made by the books*.

Typical feedback comments from teachers and families are given below.

Teachers:

- You were fair to teachers and how schools are organized. Few resources I have seen have attempted to explain major players to each other.
- What a surprise! I never thought of things this way. But you're right, schools/teachers look at things differently.
- Thanks for a clear explanation. This is a very good document and should be used as a guide to everyone who is involved in the planning for students.
- This was sort of new territory for me. I really got something out of it. I think my relationship with parents will be strengthened.
- I found this fascinating. I have never really thought about the family context. It was more a matter of trying to get the family to agree with what we suggested. Now I see that this is not the big picture view.

Families:

- This manual takes a different approach to anything I have seen. The idea of explaining teachers to parents and parents to teachers sets up a nice discussion and prepares the move to collaboration and person centered planning effectively. Overall, it seems to be a contribution both to practice and to understanding the impact of disability on educators and families.
- This is an invaluable document for lots of parents. I enjoyed reading it and agree with most of the recommendations. I hope that some teachers will read it and begin to be more flexible and creative.
- This would be great for parents if teachers knew about it. I got no help from school for planning. But this guide is really good. (Student response)
- The manual is clearly written and is VERY informative. You point out many things that I was not aware of, so I was pleasantly surprised. Thanks for not using all those teacher words – they are so annoying!
- I found this informative. I had never really thought through all the limitations around what teachers do. Next time I speak to a teacher, it will be with a different understanding.
- You pointed out the obvious. But it was only obvious AFTER I read it!
- I was surprised that teachers don't look at things the same as the rest of us. But my mom said that they have other things to think about as well, so they see things a bit different than us. (Student response)
- We had a very bad experience in the planning process. Your description of the parent's approach and different perspective is very important. As a family you definitely see the whole process in a very different way. I'm glad some people understand this.
- This is right on. I could understand all of this and it's just the way our families look at these things. (Student response)

Complimentary copies were then sent to all who participated in the study and to every English language school system in Canada, as well as to various advocate and other support groups. A number of school systems across Canada have asked for additional

copies of the book so that all their teachers involved in transition planning can benefit from the results of our study. Contact the Marsha Forest Centre and Inclusion Press at inclusion.com.

Please note: A funding contribution by the Government of Canada Social Development Partnerships Program, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada assisted us with this project.

Blog, 2010