

**HIGH SCHOOL INCLUSION + SEAMLESS TRANSITION = DESIRED
OUTCOMES: A BRIEF REPORT**

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High School Inclusion + Seamless Transition = Desired Outcomes

Schools are being held accountable not only for the outcomes of typical students, but for those of students with disabilities as well. The expectation is that education should contribute to the preparation that all US citizens need to fully and meaningfully participate in public life. This right is deeply embedded in US law and heritage; it is an inalienable right (Gilhool, 1976). It is the responsibility of public education to help ensure that all American citizens, whatever their disabilities, are afforded an equal opportunity to actively participate in all community activities, events and opportunities. Outcome-based questions have become a standard for evaluating the effectiveness of education, i.e., “Has the school system done its job in preparing students with disabilities for adult lives, which involve active participation in work, home, educational and social environments?”

Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (Wagner, 1993), as well as other studies (e.g., La Plante, Kennedy & Turpin, 1996; Malakpa, 1994; Mithaug, Moriuchi, & Fanning, 1985) have documented poor post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. In addition to high drop out rates (overall 58%), these students often exit into low-wage jobs, have higher arrest records (44%), and are unemployed in vast numbers (60%). It is estimated that approximately 75 percent of adults with severe disabilities and 92 percent of adults with profound disabilities are unemployed (La Plante, Kennedy, Kaye, & Wenger, 1996). According to Wagner (1995) and Blackorby and Wagner (1996), only 17% of students with multiple disabilities were employed or received postsecondary education during the first five years after exiting school.

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) argued that it is the school, and not the student, that must change if appreciable progress is to be made. It has been hypothesized that two significant changes to the service delivery system could impact the employment outcomes for students with disabilities— inclusive education and seamless transition from school to career (Certo, Pumpian, Fisher, Storey, & Smalley, 1997; Fisher & Sax, 1999; Gerry & Certo, 1992; Katsiyannis, de Fur, & Conderman, 1998; Lichtenstein, 1993; Meyer, 1994; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997; Szymanski, Hanley-Maxwell, & Asselin,

1992). First, inclusive education has been defined by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE, 1995) as follows:

At its core, inclusion means that students attend their home school along with their age and grade peers. A truly inclusive schooling environment is one in which students with the full range of abilities and disabilities receive their in-school educational services in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support. (p. 4)

Second, a “seamless transition” describes the use of resources from school and post-school systems (e.g., Department of Rehabilitation, Department of Developmental Disabilities) to share the costs of supporting a student-driven approach to choicemaking and transition planning related to developing careers, community living skills or opportunities, and postsecondary education for students about to age-out of their local public school system (Certo & Sax, 1999; Sax, 2000). Following graduation and the end of public school responsibility, these systems share the costs of maintaining and expanding work and non-work preferred activities seamlessly on the first day after this formal exit. In other words, a student’s last day in public school looks no different from the first day supported by adult service delivery systems.

Given the access to both inclusive education and a seamless transition, what are employment outcomes for students with significant disabilities? This report compares the outcomes for students with significant disabilities aging out of public school who experienced both inclusive education and a seamless transition with those who did not.

Method

Participants

District

This district was a medium sized school district in Southern California. The total enrollment is just over 21,500 students in grades 9 to 12. Of those students, 78% are white, non-Latino; 16% are Latino; 5% are African-American; 5% are Asian-Pacific Islander; and 2% are Native American. Every school in the district has at least 9 different languages represented, and one school has 17. The district has developed Individual Education Plans (IEP) for nine percent of the students.

Students

All students from this district who met the California definition of “severe disability” and who were exiting from the public school system were selected for this study. This resulted in the identification of 33 students. Two of the 10 high schools in the district participated in a transition service integration planning process and provided special education services to high school aged students in general education classes. A total of six students transitioned out of these two schools during the year of the study. The remaining 27 students attended one of the remaining eight high schools and did not experience a seamless transition but were mainstreamed in some general education classes such as English, art, PE, and music. This geographic selection process ensured that there were students in both the target and comparison group who had similar types of disabilities and level of support needs.

Data Collection and Analysis

During the week following the end of the school year, a school district employee asked the primary advocate teachers for the 33 students with significant disabilities about the transition process. The following information was logged for each student: seamless transition (last day of school mirrored first day of adult program), adult program provider, and location of adult program. Two months later, this school district employee contacted the adult service providers and requested the following information about the 33 students: job, wages, hours worked per week, and types of integrated activities in which the individual participated during non-work hours. The data were provided to us on code sheets. We did not have student names or adult service provider identities matched with the student data. However, the data were disaggregated by target group (those who were included and participated in the transition service integration project) and comparison group. We reviewed the data and summarized it accordingly (see Table 1).

Findings

Table 1 contains a summary of the findings. The data indicate that students with significant disabilities who experienced inclusive education and a seamless transition entered their adult lives well situated for success. Four of the six students in the target

group experienced a seamless transition, meaning that there had been significant coordination between the public school system and the adult service delivery system such that the student did not experience a disruption in services. For example, the school system contracted with direct service personnel (e.g., job developer, job coaches) from the adult service delivery system during the student's final year of public school service (typically when the student was 21 years old) so that the same staff were consistent post-transition. Similarly, students were scheduled according to their work and non-work activities departing from the traditional school calendar and time frames. For example, one student's employment required that he work during late afternoons and often on holidays. The integrated work environments and non-work activities were organized during person-centered planning sessions in which the student, his or her family and friends, school personnel, and adult agency staff were all present. Thus, the day after the termination of public school services did not vary greatly from what the student had been experiencing.

None of the comparison group students experienced a seamless transition. These students often visited the adult program or sheltered workshop in the weeks prior to the end of public school services. However, the staffing patterns, environments, and expectations changed dramatically when school-based services ended. For example, on the Tuesday following the completion of school-funded services, these students rode different buses on new routes, met new support staff who often did not know the student's goals, and faced unfamiliar environments in which to work. Most difficult for many of these students was the fact that the adult agency had to "start over with assessments" as they became acquainted with the students.

In terms of employment outcomes two months after leaving school, students who experienced inclusive education and seamless transition fared well. While the actual numbers of students are low, average wages and hours per week worked are consistently higher for the target group of students. These results stand out in stark contrast to the national outcome of employment and/or postsecondary education within the first five years after exiting school, cited earlier.

Interestingly, the types of integrated employment options were similar for the two groups, but students in the comparison group were less likely to access those jobs given

that they were placed in sheltered workshops. The sources for the jobs held by students in the target group were more varied and included recommendations by high school peers. In addition, students in the target group were more likely to engage in integrated activities during their non-work hours. These activities included community college and adult school classes, recreation and fitness centers, and community stores and services.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to review the outcomes for students who experienced inclusive education and a seamless transition. More specifically, we were interested in learning if students with significant disabilities who experienced inclusive education within academic classes were at risk of limited options for their adult lives. While the sample was small and we encourage a cautious review of the findings, the data suggest that no harm was done and, in fact, the outcomes for the target students in this study were better than the outcomes for other students in the district in both work and non-work activities.

We believe that the results were influenced by two variables. First, over the course of their high school years during which they attended general education classes, the target students developed a number of skills, relationships, and behaviors that may have increased their employability. In addition to the curriculum and content which is beyond the scope of this study, students were expected to arrive on time, engage in social exchanges, and attend to instructions in their high school classes. In terms of relationships and peer support, students with significant disabilities in general education classes experienced a wide range of friendships. As typical high school students began their part-time jobs during their junior and senior years, they often informed the special educators of jobs at their place of employment. These job recommendations were invaluable. Thus, we believe that access to general education classes had a significant impact on the integrated work outcomes experienced by the target students. It is important to note that the comparison students experienced a segregated academic curriculum and a significant number of hours spent in homogeneously-grouped community-based instruction during their high school years (age 14-18), and the vast majority of them transitioned into a sheltered workshop.

The second variable we believe was important was the seamless transition planning that occurred for the target students. As school staff and adult providers talked with one another, worked together, and shared vital student support information, they were able to individualized supports, create workplace accommodations, and implement consistent behavioral support plans. This seamless transition service delivery model provided students and their families with an entire year to evaluate the appropriateness of the adult agency and its services. This arrangement significantly minimized the disruption students typically experience when transitioning from the public school system to the adult provider network.

Conclusion

Although the number of students served in this pilot study was small, the findings represent all of the students with significant disabilities who aged out of the 21,500-student school district. Based on these findings, we believe that school systems can prepare students with disabilities for quality adult lives. Further, the outcomes for the target group of students demonstrate that the historical underemployment and unemployment of individuals with significant disabilities can be systematically addressed. Two of the important factors in achieving these outcomes are access to: 1) general education classes, curriculum, and peers; and 2) a seamless transition that connects public school services and those of the adult service system.

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Table 1: Outcomes for Students with Significant Disabilities

Outcome	Target Group	Comparison Group
Number of students exiting public school services	6	25 (2 students lost to follow-up)
Number of students who successfully transitioned seamlessly	4 (67%)	0
Number of students in competitive employment (2 month post-school)	5 (83%)	3 (12%)
Number of students in sheltered workshops	1 (17%)	21 (84%)
Average pay per hour	\$5.75	\$2.85
Range of hours worked (paid) per week	9 to 20	0 to 20
Examples of competitive employment jobs	Ushers in a movie theater Fast food dining room attendant Stock clerk in warehouse	Fast food dining room attendant Landscaping

Job leads	High school peers School staff Community members Adult agency connections	School staff Workshop staff
Examples of integrated non-work activities	Weight training Community college Using employee discount for movies Classes at Adult Ed Center Community recreation centers Fitness centers Using stores and services (post office, bank)	Classes at Adult Ed Center