



Counterpoint

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PENNSYLVANIA'S SECONDARY TRANSITION INITIATIVE: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE Fall 2003

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Pennsylvania's Secondary Transition Initiative has been the catalyst and example for seven other jurisdictions that joined with Pennsylvania in 2004 to form the Interagency Transition Community of Practice that is facilitated by the OSEP-funded IDEA Partnership at NASDSE. This article explains the history and progress of Pennsylvania's initiative from late 1999 to late 2003.

The IDEA Memorandum of Understanding

In Pennsylvania, postsecondary school transition is becoming a shared responsibility across agencies that are parties to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Memorandum of Understanding (IDEA-MOU). Ten offices from four State agencies comprise the IDEA-MOU partnership. The IDEA-MOU, enacted in December 1999, identifies how services for youth with disabilities will be provided and coordinated in the State by identifying agency responsibility for services, financial responsibility, conditions and terms of reimbursement, procedures to address interagency disputes, and procedures for coordinating services. While this agreement covers services for students with disabilities at all levels, it has been especially important in launching the cross-systems planning and professional development efforts for the State's Secondary Transition Initiative.

The Community of Practice

Since the inception of the IDEA-MOU – and the initial meetings of the Interagency Team – the principles of Community of Practice (or CoP) were advanced by creating a shared agenda to support the successful transition of students to postsecondary outcomes, including postsecondary education and training, employment, and community participation.

Pennsylvania's Community of Practice, focusing on secondary transition, embraces the essential elements of CoP. Members share a common interest and responsibility to provide services to youth with disabilities who are transitioning from school to adult services. The team agreed to come together to expand the knowledge, experience, and the leveraging power of the group. The MOU-IDEA Interagency Team has a shared vision, is goal-oriented and results- focused. The Team emphasizes understanding each member's role, recognizing the validity of all interests, and continuously asking who is not represented within each group.

The CoP for transition has gained visibility and momentum through several cross-systems training activities. In fall 2000, a series of meetings were held in seven locations across the State. The IDEA-MOU Interagency Team determined that local service providers had to have a basic understanding of the range of services provided by schools and other agencies before they could be expected to invite or be invited to the table to cooperatively plan for and provide services to students and clients. Staff from each department, member office, and bureau presented basic information about programs, services, and contact information. Educators, agency staff, and parents attended the training.

Here are the IDEA-MOU Interagency Team's guiding principles:

- * Identify common goals;
- * Continuously work as a team;
- * Assure ongoing communication with all team members;
- * Build relationships with team members;
- * Maintain a welcoming demeanor;
- * Focus on student outcomes;
- * Value parent partnerships;
- * Value the opinions of all stakeholders;
- * Build trust across all team members;

- * Have mutual respect among team members;
- * Build networks and relationships across “systems” and audiences;
- * Value one another’s perspectives;
- * Create transition strategies and activities based on the bigger picture; and
- * Build the foundation – collaborate, cooperate, and communicate.

To move the guiding principles into action, it is necessary to:

- * Recognize roadblocks;
- * Work through issues;
- * Focus on priorities;
- * Foster creativity;
- * Work with a futuristic attitude;
- * Keep a student-centered focus; and
- * Encourage self-determination practices.

It is also necessary to understand that there are “real world problems”
to recognize and address, including:

- * Communication breakdowns;
- * Turf issues;
- * Money issues;
- * Staff turnover;
- * Differing priorities and language;
- * Lack of relationships and mutual respect; and
- * Lack of opportunity to network.

State Policy Actions

The priority of transition for students with disabilities is also evident in the State policy efforts of the IDEA-MOU partners. Policy actions and program guidance have been issued in support of the interagency work needed to expand opportunities for youth with disabilities to transition to post-school outcomes

- ✓ The Bureau of Special Education and Drug and Alcohol Programs issued a joint memorandum in September 2000, affirming the roles and responsibilities outlined by the IDEA-MOU.

- ✓ An October 2002 Mental Health and Substance Abuse bulletin conveyed *The Roles and Responsibilities of County Mental Health/Mental Retardation Programs in the Development of a Child's Individual Education Program*.

- ✓ A bulletin on *Performance Expectations and Recommended Guidelines for the County Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP)* was jointly issued by Pennsylvania's Deputy Secretaries for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services; Medical Assistance Programs; Children, Youth, and Families; Mental Retardation; Juvenile Court Judges Commission; Health Promotion and Disease Prevention; Elementary and Secondary Education; Department of Health; and Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. This bulletin reinforced the principles of cross-system collaboration.

- ✓ In spring 2002, the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) began funding five pilot projects to support the transition of adolescents and young adults with mental disorders to adult life. Funds to support these projects are made available through the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant funds.

- ✓ The Office of Mental Retardation is leading the development of local interagency teams to promote pilot projects to promote employment outcomes of youth with disabilities in three areas of the State.

- ✓ The Office of Children, Family and Youth promotes interagency collaboration through its Program Improvement Plan for Child and Family Well Being Outcomes, and especially encourages interagency participation and coordination of services through the Chafee Independent Living Workgroup.

- ✓ The State Youth Council includes cross-agency participation and has included outreach to youth with disabilities in the priorities of the Council.

- ✓ The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) has played a leadership role in the IDEA-MOU efforts and the Pennsylvania Transition Initiative. OVR's administration has established transition as one of its top priorities. The State plan or blueprint of the public VR program has included transition goals since fiscal 2001. In fiscal 2002, 34 percent of the total number of individuals served were under age 25 (the national average was 28 percent).

The Role of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)

The mission of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) is to support the efforts of the Bureau of Special Education and its initiatives, and build the capacity of local educational agencies to provide appropriate services to students. PaTTAN has taken a leadership role in the transition initiatives in Pennsylvania for many years, including the IDEA-MOU activities. The Bureau of Special Education, through the PaTTAN system, has provided the majority of financial support for training and technical assistance activities in Pennsylvania through IDEA and its State Improvement Grant funds.

Under the auspices of the Bureau of Special Education, the mini-grant program assists local education agencies in implementing research-based practices related to improving special education services for students with disabilities. The program must make a commitment to improving measurable student results. All projects are expected to produce quantifiable data related to subsequent changes in student achievement and measurable objectives. Clear evaluative methods are required.

Mentoring mini-grants (up to \$7,500) were available for 2002 Transition Conference program participants. To qualify for a mini-grant, a school district, charter school, or approved private school team had to include an administrator, teacher, parent, local transition consultant, and community agency representative. Agency participation was strongly encouraged, and teams were required to attend the entire conference. Mini-grants were awarded for teams in: employment/community living; career development/awareness; interagency and community partnerships; self-determination; transition assessment; postsecondary education; and the interagency referral process. PaTTAN is responsible for overseeing the mini-grants.

Additional Initiatives

To expand transition services in Pennsylvania, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Department of Education designed and implemented a financial Memorandum of Understanding. As approved by the Department of Labor and Industry and Department of Education, 39 local and two statewide transition projects were initiated in fall 2003. Each of the 39 local projects fits into more than one category, as listed below.

- * Outreach-underserved;
- * Assessment (vocational);
- * Mentoring;
- * Employment; and
- * Post-secondary education and training

There are also two statewide projects – capacity building and needs assessment. The IDEA-MOU Interagency Team focuses on sharing information and training across systems, and is constantly working to create systemic change in Pennsylvania. The team has already initiated unprecedented practices through its jointly sponsored training events and conferences, as well as joint funding for direct service projects. This team, functioning as a Community of Practice, is always open to “pushing the envelope” and extending cross-systems policies and practices for providing transition services. The cross-systems training agenda of the Pennsylvania Transition Initiative planned for (and carried out in) 2003-2004 is shown below.

Pennsylvania Transition Initiative: Cross-Systems Training Agenda, 2003-2004
Implemented by PaTTAN

Building Transition Communities of Practice: Action Planning Strategies for Building Local Interagency Transition Teams

December 3, 2003, and February 5, 2004: King of Prussia

December 5, 2003, and February 23, 2004: Harrisburg

December 11, 2003, and February 24, 2004: Pittsburgh

Building Communities of Practice: Developing Cross-System Assessment Portfolios for Transitioning Youth

January 28, 2004: King of Prussia

January 29, 2004: Harrisburg

January 30, 2004: Pittsburgh

Pennsylvania Groundhog Day: Job Shadowing Experiences for Students with Disabilities

February 2004: 29 Intermediate Unit Regional Events

Building Communities of Practice: Practical Applications of Cross-Systems Self-Determination Strategies for Transitioning Youth

April 13, 2004: King of Prussia

April 14, 2004: Harrisburg

April 14, 2004: Pittsburgh

The 2004 Pennsylvania Transition Conference

July 13-16, 2004: Penn State Conference Center

To contact key personnel of this initiative,
call The IDEA Partnership toll-free at 1-877-IDEA-INFO (1-877-433-2463).

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