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TRANSITION SERVICES FOR NON-MAINSTREAMED STUDENTS

by  
Rosemary Dobbins

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
April 28, 2005

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_

Date Approved May 10, 2005

## ABSTRACT

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Transition Services for Non-Mainstreamed Students  
2005  
Dr. Mian Wang  
Master of Arts in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to investigate the vocational needs and transition services for non-mainstreamed high school students. Two transition needs and service surveys were conducted to 46 high school students under special education services and to 6 professionals who provide services. It was to determine if the services that the juniors and seniors were receiving would either prepare them to enter into the work force or to continue with their education. The findings show that there is some discrepancy between students and professionals about the existence of transition plan, students' involvement in the plan-making process and their assessment on how the students are prepared for their post-school life. Some issues were discussed with respect to how to help improve the transition planning services in terms of students' needs and how to encourage students' involvement in the transition planning and implementation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

The goal of most special education departments, at the high school level, is for their students to graduate and become productive members of society. But there is a commonly asked question about what a productive member of society is and how these students are being prepared for their life after high school. Although transition planning begins at the elementary level, it does not take in to consideration of specific preparation for life until high school. Among the total population of children and youth served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (nearly 6,000,000 in 2000) which still increases every year, nearly 45% are engaged in secondary school programs, and the numbers and ages of secondary school youth are expected to continue to increase until the year 2010. Therefore, it is extremely important that transitional services be reviewed, assessed, and changed if the students who are receiving these services are going to actually benefiting from them in the future.

IDEA and its amendments provide funding mandates for the identification and provision of special education services to students with disabilities from birth to age 21 (through high school). The goal of IDEA is to promote more positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Despite the requirement of IDEA' 97 that mandates coordinated services for students, the law does not specify how service coordination should be provided (Hart, Zimbrich, & Whelley, 2002).

Unfortunately, there continues to be a lack of appropriate services, supports and/or post

high school assistance to meet the educational and/or career training needs of teenagers and young adults (National Council on Disability, 2000). This is especially true for those students who are not mainstreamed into regular education.

Among the published standardized assessment instruments, only a few targets on the primary domains of transition planning, such as postsecondary education or training, employment, and life skills related to living arrangements, independent living consumer skills, communication, personal-social skills, health, and self-determination (Clark, 1996). The future outcome of children with disabilities looks grim without the proper guidance and instruction from their secondary schools. The failure of schools to provide reliable assessment instruments causes a child to enter a world in which he or she is unprepared.

Research suggests that early experiences in varied types of employment can be influential in the success of youth with disabilities in the labor market (NLTS, 1006). These experiences, as well as a good education, can decrease the wage gap between people with disabilities and those without. Introducing vocational training programs, school-to-work and independent living classes can increase the possibility that students with disabilities will be prepared and confident to face the future upon graduation.

For purposes of this study, the term “non-mainstreamed students” refers to those students who do not attend regular education classes but remain in the resource room throughout the day. The term “productive members of society” means that the students, through either education or training, have become gainfully employed. Transition services means a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-orientated process, that promotes movement from school to post-secondary employment,



continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.3).

By asking both educators and students to evaluate the transition services that are provided to non-mainstreamed students in a high school, this study will focus on examining if the students have received satisfactory transition services and what the barriers are to hinder the quality of services that the students have received.

### Significance of the Study

The literature in the area of transition indicates that too many students leave school with no future plans. According to Harvey (2001), "Special educators need to find programs that keep students with disabilities in school and that help them attain the needed skills for competitive employment, independence, and success in adult life"(p.14). The New Jersey Special Education Code on Transition states, "For every student classified with an IEP that is 14 years of age and older (or younger, if appropriate), there needs to be a statement of transition service needs. The statement of transition service needs focuses on the student's courses of study. It is an identification of and planning for the courses (required, elective, modified or specially designed courses as well as other educational experiences in the school or the community) that the student will be taking in each grade or year from 14 years of age on" (2003, 3.6(d)).

Transition planning has to become an essential component of the educational process because research shows that even though regular education students are continuing to succeed in post-graduation programs, students with disabilities continue to lag behind their peers. (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1990). Even though some adolescents take advantage of educational

opportunities that substantially enhance their human capital and increase their productivity later in life, others make poor choices and face unfortunate circumstances that can lead to inadequate education. This may substantially endanger a successful transition to adulthood and increase the risk of dependence (Wells, Sandefur, & Hogan, 2003).

Whereas the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 requires that services for students be coordinated, the law does not specify how service coordination should be provided (Hart, Zimbrich, & Whelley, 2002). Also, the law does not specify a guideline for providing these services and/or what these services will entail. The study of Baer et al. (2003) showed that vocational education and work study participation were the best predictors of postsecondary education. In addition, Clark noted (1996), "Vocational assessment can provide the information needed to match the student's abilities and preferences to appropriate training programs. It can also identify the services required by the individual to make the transition from school to work as smooth and as successful as possible." (4.)

Even though student services are mandated in high school under IDEA, post-secondary services are based on eligibility determination and on availability of funding from an adult agency. Therefore, graduates with disabilities are more likely to be employed following high school if (1) comprehensive vocational training is a primary component of their high school program, and (2) they have a job secured at the time of graduation. Given the important issues aforementioned, it is of importance to examine what transition services schools have provided to help students with disabilities to

prepare their post-school life and as well as to evaluate how students have participated in the process and if they are satisfied with the services received.

#### Statement of the Purpose

The objectives of this study are: (a) to assess the vocational needs and transition services for non-mainstreamed students at Sterling High School, and (b) to determine if the services that the juniors and seniors are receiving will either help prepare them to enter into the work force or to continue their education. The study was designed to assess, and help improve, the transition planning services in terms of students' needs.

The purpose of this study is to determine if transition services are being provided to every non-mainstreamed student at Sterling High School and to analyze their effectiveness on the future plans of these students in order to help them improve their transition planning.

#### Research Questions

In this study, the major research questions are as follows:

1. What kind of preparations are being made for the junior and senior non-mainstreamed students at Sterling High School prior to graduation?
2. What are the objectives and components of a transition plan?
3. How much have the students participated in developing their own transition plan?
4. How satisfied are the students with their transition services?
5. How has the school continued to provide the services after the students' graduation?

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When adolescents with mild disabilities are assessed, undoubtedly questions will arise about their future roles and needed services. To address these questions, the assessment team must consider the transition of these children from school to post-graduation. Transition assessment is an individualized, ongoing process which should involve the student, his/her parents, and a whole team of experienced individuals working together to create a plan that will prepare the child for such adult roles as: (a) postsecondary education, (b) employment, (c) independent living, and (d) social and personal relationships (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2005). This literature review will focus on three main areas concerning the transition of adolescents to adulthood: (1) an overview of transitional services, (2) issues of transitional assessment, and (3) review of the transition and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

#### Overview of Transitional Services

Beginning in 1985, significant research and demonstration activities were initiated for the explicit purpose of improving the transition of youth with disabilities from school to work, post-secondary education, and community living (National Council on Disability, 2000). For the approximately 250,000 to 300,000 students who exit their public special education programs each year, the transition policy initiative was an attempt to focus the nation's resources and vision to help those students achieve valued adult lifestyles. Throughout the 1980's, school-to-work transition services for youth with

disabilities expanded, principally emphasizing (a) state and local efforts to improve the high school curriculum to address students' development of functional skills for work and community living; (b) opportunities for students to learn in real-world contexts; (c) increased student and family participation in the development of transition plans focused on a range of post-school outcomes in the areas of employment, post-secondary education, and community living; and (d) concerted efforts to increase the level and intensity of interagency cooperation among educators, employers, and community service agencies in addressing the transition needs of secondary students with disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2000).

The results of most of the post-school follow-up studies suggested that students with disabilities had a very difficult time adjusting to life after graduation from high school. During their final years in school, these youth remained dependent on IEP (Individual Education Plan) teams to make decisions, assess performance, and make linkages with service agencies (Chadsky-Rusch & O'Reilly, 1992). Rarely were they taught, required, or invited to advocate their own interests. The unemployment, under-education, and continued substantial dependence on parents, social isolation, and lack of involvement in community-oriented activities, characteristic of many individuals with disabilities, are factors that foster continued dependence among youth in transition (Mithaug, Martin, & Agran, 1987).

In 1991, the Office of Special Education Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) initiated a new discretionary grant system for states to overhaul and expand transition services to youth with disabilities. Statewide systems change transition projects were required to focus on six common elements: (a) individualized education program

(IEP)/transition planning, (b) assessment, (c) student empowerment, (d) parent and family involvement, (e) curriculum and instructional change, and (f) school-community coordination. These statewide system change transition projects were funded on 5-year cycles; states also received technical assistance and evaluation services from the National Transition Network, a nationwide consortium of universities (National Council on Disabilities, 1993). According to Clark (1996), "Current practice in transition assessment includes a variety of approaches. New IDEA requirements suggest that assessment for transition services include tests, interviews, direct observation, and curriculum-based assessment." The review of this section will specifically focus on the following: (a) the legal requirements for transition services, and (b) the conceptual framework of transition education services.

#### Legal Requirements for Transition Services

According to IDEA, all children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LEA). These services are to be provided to all students with disabilities from age 3 until 21. It is the responsibility of the district board of education to make sure these services are being provided and monitored. Every child receiving services must be classified and have an IEP (Individual Education Plan). IDEA mandates that beginning at age 14, a student's IEP should include a statement of the transition service needs of the student under the applicable parts of the student's IEP that focus on his/her courses of study.

Sitlington and Clark (2001) pointed out: "References to career/vocational assessment are included in such laws as the (a) Individuals with Disabilities Act, (b) the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Applied Technology Act, (c) the

Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992, and (d) the Job Training Reform Amendments of 1002, (Sitlington & Clark, 2001). All of these legislative initiatives clearly relate to the issue of promoting movement from school to postschool activities.” (p.6)

### Conceptual Framework of Transition Education Services

Kallio and Owens (2003) suggested that when beginning to plan and prepare, students should ask the questions such as: “What are my abilities and interests?” “What do I want and need from everyday life as an adult?” (p. 8). Developing independence, exploring one’s talents and interests, deciding upon a career path, and pursuing either employment or additional schooling are just some of the challenges that youth in transition face (National Information Center for Youth with Disabilities, 1997). When appropriate, consultation from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS), Department of Labor (DOL), and other agencies providing transition services should be included (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.7(d) 9). For students with disabilities aged 16 and over, or younger if deemed appropriate by the IEP team, the IEP shall include a statement of needed transition services, including, when appropriate, a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages (N.J.A.C. 6A:14 3.7(d)10).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) offers a unique opportunity to examine post-school outcomes from a longitudinal perspective for a nationally representative sample of youth with disabilities. Research suggests that early employment experiences can be influential in the success that youth with disabilities ultimately achieve in the labor market. Further, early experiences can influence work-related behaviors that may stay with people throughout their working lives (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Postsecondary education, including vocational training, may be particularly important for students with disabilities, who often leave school poorly prepared for work. Unfortunately, sociologists have paid almost no attention to those individuals with disabilities who are making the transition from late adolescence to full participation as adults in American society (Wells, Sandefur & Hogan, 2003). Students with disabilities drop out of high school in large numbers, (28%). According to Danforth and Taff (2004), “The lack of a high school diploma for nearly half of the students with emotional and behavioral difficulties is particularly problematic. For all students with disabilities who do complete high school, access to employment and postsecondary education still falls substantially below the levels attained by their peers without disabilities. In general, when students with disabilities do find employment, their earnings tend to be only slightly above the minimum wage in entry-level jobs, and they are faced with limited prospects for promotion and personal growth.”

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA), enacted in 1994, authorized state funding for the development of programs that improved the work-related skills of students exiting school. School-to-Work programs must include the following activities: help students with career selection through the provision of career awareness, exploration, and counseling services (with career major selected no later than 11<sup>th</sup> grade); connect school-based learning and work-based learning; and provide instruction in work attitudes, employability skills, and participation skills (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 2004).

Students who drop out of school today are confronted with significant job competition, work environments driven by significant technical influences, and less than receptive employers. Businesses are looking for the competitive edge, and students who



do not complete high school are seen as less competitive (Harvey, 2001). Even for those who remain in school through graduation, only about one third have a concentration of vocational courses in a particular skill area, and only slightly more have work experience as part of their vocational training (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

The Office of Special Education Programs has reported annual school-exiting data on special education students by disability category and age since 1984-1985.

Accountability in special education was mandated by the Education of All Handicapped Children Act Amendments of 1983 (P.L. 98-199). Some researchers have reported that students with disabilities drop out of school at a rate three times that of their peers (Harvey, 2001).

True efficacy of special education would be better expressed in terms of the extent to which it helps students with disabilities to improve performance, participate in, and complete public school education. Special educators need to find programs that keep students with disabilities in school and that help them attain the needed skills for competitive employment, independence, and success in adult life. According to Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1991), "The mission of special education is not restricted to the teaching of academic subjects, nor is it to protect students from a harsh adult environment. It is to prepare them to participate fully in the mainstream adult world." It is imperative that students with disabilities be prepared to face the challenges of a complex world and labor market (Harvey, 2001).

#### Issues of Transitional Assessment

According to Venn (2004), assessment of career and vocational skills "involves measuring and evaluating work skills as well as competencies in social interaction,

functional academics, and daily living activities. More specifically, career assessment encompasses evaluation of the practical life skills needed for postschool success.” (p.425)

Recently, our society has begun to change its attitudes towards people with disabilities, recognizing both the possibility and importance of successful employment of those with disabilities. Vocational assessment is the most important process available for assembling information needed for students to make well-grounded career decisions (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1990). According to Sitlington & Clark (2001), “As planning teams move to identify postsecondary goals, professionals and students with disabilities and their families need to identify effective assessment practices and to understand that assessment is an ongoing process.” (p.5)

Introducing vocational education in the high schools is one way to provide students with the opportunity to develop occupational competencies through sequential educational instruction and training appropriate for their abilities and needs (Dowdy & Evers, 1996). Vocational training requires placing the student on the job to obtain work experience, which cannot be simulated in a school setting (Halloran & Johnson, 1992). Also, vocational training is a way for the non-mainstreamed student to acquire those critical skills necessary to effectively compete in the work force.

Special educators need to know two critical elements to make transitional planning a successful reality. The local and regional economic pictures, including the labor market and demand for labor, are primary elements of which special educators need to be aware in facilitating transitional planning for students with disabilities. Additionally, special educators need to know what interests, preferences, aptitudes, and abilities students with disabilities possess if they are to develop realistic individual

transitional plans (ITPs) and to assist individual education plan (IEP) teams in selecting an appropriate course of study for students with disabilities at the secondary level.

Parents and students need to be actively involved in the process of transitional planning and to have ownership in the ITP that is developed as part of a student's IEP. With parents and students involved in the planning process, the chance is greater that the transition plan developed will become a reality. Moreover, students, parents, educators, and other interested parties need to view students' transitional plans as realistic and attainable. Transitional plans are crafted around the individual students, their educational needs, and the labor market into which the students will eventually enter.

According to McLoughlin & Lewis (2005), "At minimum, transition assessment should provide accurate and reliable information in these key areas:"

- Determining the preferences, interests, expectations, and priorities of the student and family
- Establishing post-school outcomes and goals
- Identifying the student's current level of performance with respect to the curricular and instructional components of post-school goals and outcomes
- Establishing benchmarks or indicators of the successful achievement of post-school goals and outcomes
- Determining adaptations, supports, services, and technologies that may facilitate the achievement of post-school goals and outcomes
- Identifying curricular and instructional activities and strategies required to achieve post-school goals and outcomes

Many studies have been conducted over the past decade to assess the post-school outcomes associated with special education. It has provided direct response to parent, teacher, student, and public concern over the applicability of academic, social, and vocational skills taught via special education and related services. According to Love and Malian (1997), "A critical outcome associated with effective education appears to be a successful transition from school to adult life." However, a number of studies have indicated that students who exit special education frequently experience significant difficulty making the transition into adult life. These studies reported that only 16% of youth with disabilities have access to postsecondary education or training compared to 56% of the general population. Other results include high unemployment and poor community adjustment despite participation in individualized special education programs (Bove, McNeil, Paolucci-Whitcomb & Nevin, 1991).

#### Summary of Literature Review

Although the last 2 years of high school are the most critical years for students with disabilities to plan for their future, planning usually begins by age 14. Research suggests that although there are many steps to be taken to ensure positive outcomes for these students, many schools are ignoring them, and therefore, students are leaving high school unprepared for the future. Special education students need to take control of their future and advocate for their rights, as spelled out in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). They need to become actively involved in preparing their ITP, as part of their IEP, and to make sure that what is in the plan is carried out within the time specified. Non-mainstreamed students do not have the same opportunities that regular education students have in being prepared for life after high school unless their transition

plans are individually prepared and carried out with the help of the teachers, parents and the students working together as a team.

Even though postschool outcome research has indicated that transition activities in the form of community work experiences, functionally orientated curricula, and community-focused curricula, contribute significantly to postschool employment, these programs remain optional or are being cut back in many current school improvement efforts (Baer, Flexer, Amstutz, Hoffman, Brothers, Stelzer, & Zechman, 2003).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Context of the Study

Sterling High School is a public school located in the town of Somerdale, New Jersey. Students from six area elementary schools (four public and two private) attend Sterling High School, which is the only high school in the district. The school enrolls about 969 students in grades 9-12, with the majority of them coming from Somerdale, Stratford, and Magnolia. Laurel Springs is a sending district and enrolls an average of 20-30 students per year. According to the 2003-2004 enrollments, 17% of the students were African American, less than 1% American Indian, 2% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 77% were white.

At the time of the 2000 census, the total population of Somerdale was 5,192, with the median age of 39.0. Over 84% of the population had at least a high school diploma, and over 16% had at least a bachelor's degree. The average household income was \$46,898. Seventy-five percent of the population was white, and 17.7% were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The total population of Stratford is 7,271 with the median age of 37.7. Over 86.6% of the population had at least a high school diploma, and 20% had at least a bachelor's degree. The average household income was \$50,977. Eighty-eight percent were white and 6.6% were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). According to the 2000 census, the town of Magnolia had a population of 4,409 with a median age of 36.1. At least 80.7% of the population had a high school diploma,

and 12.2% had at least a bachelor's degree. The average household income was \$43,728 and 77% were white and 17.8% were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Laurel Springs had a population of 1970 and the median age was 36.9. At least 87% had a high school diploma, and at least 22.5% had a bachelor's degree. The average household income was \$52,500, with 94.4% of the population white and 2.7% African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

### Population and Sample Selection

Eleventh and twelfth grade non-mainstreamed students were targeted for this study, since they were closest to graduation. Students in grades 9 and 10 would be at the early stages of a transition plan, and therefore, not as familiar with the planning process. Of the 65 students asked to participate in the study, 46 (71%) actually completed and returned their surveys.

Six professionals who were in direct contact with students within the special education curriculum in the high school were asked to participate in the study. Of the six professionals who received the survey, 5 (80%) actually completed and returned the survey.

### Data Collection Procedure

In order to conduct the study at Sterling High School, a letter was written to the school principal explaining the purpose of the study and a request for his permission (in writing) to conduct the research. A copy of the survey was also included with the letter. The special education supervisor, social worker, guidance counselor for special education students, two special education teachers, and Learning Disability Testing Coordinator (LDTC), were informed of my research and consulted as to the distribution procedure.

Also, all of the professionals aforementioned were asked to complete a survey entitled “Transition Needs Assessment: Evaluating Your Secondary Education Program.”

The survey was distributed to the students at a career awareness meeting conducted by the special education department assistant. After the goals of the career awareness program were discussed, I explained to the students why the survey was being conducted and asked if they would like to participate. I announced to the group that if anyone wished to participate in the survey, they should remain in their seats and those not interested should return to their classes. Out of 65 students, 53 remained in the class to complete the survey. The surveys were handed out, and I read the disclaimer and introduction section to the group and explained that when they were finished, all they needed to do was to place the survey in the envelope on the teacher’s desk. Each question was explained to the group, after the surveys being handed out, to ensure that the students provide their response honestly under the condition of having thorough understanding of the survey questions. The survey for the professional staff was distributed together with a letter requesting their timely return of the completed survey.

#### Measures

A written survey was designed to evaluate the transition services presently available to the junior and senior non-mainstreamed students. The survey questions were adapted from the Transition Needs Assessment: Evaluating Your Secondary Education Program (The New Jersey Partnership for Transition from School to Adult Life for Youth with Disabilities, 1997). The questions listed several skills training program options to check-off if appropriate, according to each student’s individual plan, and specific questions regarding their involvement in writing the plan. The questions focused on the



individual student's knowledge of his/her plan and what part they played in shaping the transition plans to meet their needs and goals.

Also included in the survey was a space to identify any services they wish had been available to them, but were not.

The survey distributed to the professional staff was to assess the components utilized in the transition planning process. It was adapted from the Transition Needs Assessment: Evaluating Your Secondary Education Program (The New Jersey Partnership for Transition from School to Adult Life for Youth with Disabilities, 1997). It was to determine the types of vocational skills/training available, parental involvement, interagency collaboration, follow-up procedures, Individual Transition Plans, and Exit Plans.

#### Data Analysis

The results of the surveys were analyzed based on the responses provided by the students and the staff. The statistical package SPSS was used to analyze the information and the figures and tables were created to present the analysis results. All surveys were manually checked for response completion, and all comments from the open-ended questions were coded by type. Some surveys included blank responses to the questions and were treated as missing values in the process of data analysis by use of cases leastwise deletion.

Since the objective of the surveys was to determine what the students and professional staff feel about the transition services being provided, how much they have been involved in writing the transition plan, and what services they would recommend, it was important to categorize the information from each of the 14 questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Profile of the Sample

All 11th and 12th grade special education students at the career awareness meeting, conducted by the special education department assistant, were asked to complete this survey. Of the 65 students at the meeting, 46 decided to participate. Of those students who participated, 52% were juniors and 46% were seniors, 65% were male, and 35% were female.

The Director of Special Education, Social Worker, two special education teachers, guidance counselor for special education, and the Learning Disabilities Testing Coordinator (LDTC) were also asked to participate in this survey. Of the six professionals selected, five (80%) completed the survey.

#### Major Findings

This study was based on five research questions. The analysis of the results will be reported in the following areas: (a) preparations, (b) objectives and components, (c) participation, (d) satisfaction, and (e) services provided.

#### *Preparations*

Although it was assumed that the junior and senior non-mainstreamed students at Sterling High School were receiving adequate transition services for post-graduation in the area of skills training programs, about 80% of the students felt they were only somewhat prepared for life after high school. The remainder of the students felt they were either (a) very prepared, (b) unprepared, or (c) unsure about how ready they were

for the future, based on their training programs. Table 1 shows the skills training programs that have been offered to the students in the past 2 years. Career awareness (58.7%) and job-seeking/keeping skills (52.2%) were the areas where the students had the highest percentage of training programs. Personal living skills and independent living skills were moderately presented; where self-advocacy and recreation/leisure were the areas for which the students felt they were least prepared. On average, 33.5% of the students did not respond to each of the skills training program choices.

As for the professional staff, 100% agreed that skills' training was included in the program curriculum and that career awareness, job seeking/keeping skills, and personal living skills were of great importance to the success of students after graduation.

Table 1

*Frequency Table of Skills Training Programs*

| Skills                         | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Career awareness               | 27        | 58.7%      |
| Job-seeking/keeping skills     | 24        | 52.2%      |
| Independent living skills      | 17        | 37.0%      |
| Personal living skills         | 18        | 39.1%      |
| Social skills development      | 11        | 23.9%      |
| Transportation training        | 5         | 10.9%      |
| Recreation/leisure             | 4         | 8.0%       |
| Organizational/problem solving | 10        | 21.7%      |
| Self-advocacy                  | 4         | 8.7%       |
| Other                          | 5         | 10.9%      |

*Objectives and Components*

Students were asked if their transition plans included any long-term goals. As seen in Table 2, 52% reported employment, 44% reported independent living, and 35% reported postsecondary education as their long-term goals.

The professional staff was asked if the transition plans at Sterling High School included objectives and long-term goals. Employment and/training, independent living, and community participation were the top three objectives/goals reported by 100% of the professional staff.

Table 2

*Frequency Of Transition Plan Including Long-Term Goals*

| Frequency               | Responses | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Employment              | 24        | 52.2       |
| Independent Living      | 20        | 43.5       |
| Postsecondary Education | 16        | 34.8       |

Of the 46 students who completed the survey, 52% reported that they planned to attend college, 17% percent reported that they planned to work and attend college, 9% reported that they planned to attend a trade school, 7% planned to work, 2% planned to join the military, 4% chose other, and 9% were undecided.

When asked if they felt their Transition Plan and Individual Education Plan (IEP) supported each other, 44% reported yes, 2% reported no, and 26% indicated they “did not know.” Consequently, 44% reported that both plans had their individual (best) interests in mind when they were written, 7% reported that they did not have their interests in

mind, and 26% did not know. Twenty-three percent of the students did not answer the question.

### *Participation*

When asked about having a transition plan, 49% reported that they had a plan in place, 40% reported they did not have a plan, and 11% reported that they were not sure. Twenty percent reported that they were involved in writing the transition plan, 54% reported they were somewhat involved, and 26% reported they were not involved in writing the plan.

### *Satisfaction*

When asked about the format of their Transition Plan, 44% reported that their plan included objectives/activities to reach their long-term goals, 28% included persons/agencies responsible for helping them reach their goals, 17% included timelines, and 22% included progress on their activities. On average, 33% of the students chose not to answer the selections pertaining to this question. Table 3 shows the summary.

Table 3

#### *What Is Included In The Format Of Your Transition Plan*

| Frequency                           | Responses | Percentages |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Objectives/activities to reach goal | 20        | 44%         |
| Persons/agencies responsible        | 13        | 28%         |
| Timelines                           | 8         | 17%         |
| Progress on activities              | 10        | 22%         |

When students were asked if they had a formal Exit Plan, 13% reported they had one, 35% did not, and 44% did not know. Four percent did not answer the question. As for available services upon graduation, 54% reported that they would be available, 7% said no, and 15% did not know. None of the students identified any services they wish they had received at Sterling High School, but did not. Of the professional staff surveyed, 60% reported that transition plans needed more comprehensive development and 40% reported that no further development was needed.

### *Services Provided*

The professional staff (100%), reported that each student had a formal “Exit Plan” and that the plan summarized the students’ present status in the area of employment, independent living, and community participation. They also reported that the plan was developed as a group, consisting of parents, students, and other relevant parties and that formal follow-up procedures exist for special education program graduates (40% reported yes and 40% reported no). Even though only 80% of the professional staff reported that there were follow-up procedures, 100% of the staff reported that this information was collected immediately following graduation.

When the survey was completed, and the data collected, the low percentage of students having an Exit Plan puzzled me. Upon further investigation, the department assistant informed me that the seniors do not complete an Exit Plan until the month before graduation.

In reviewing the data collection procedure, I would have to say that the data instrument was fairly effective. However, if I had to distribute a survey to special education students again, I would read the survey out loud, one question at a time, so that

everyone understood what I was asking and, therefore, everyone would be on the same page!

As far as the professional staff survey, I would reduce the number of questions and make sure that the variables were similar to the student survey. This would reduce a lot of confusion brought about by the number of non-relevant questions.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

#### Limitations of the Study

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#### Summary

Based on the students who completed the survey, most of the junior and senior non-mainstreamed students at Sterling High School do not feel prepared for life after high school. Less than 7% felt very prepared for post-high school, and 78% felt only somewhat prepared. This does not seem to be surprising given the fact only 48% of the students actually said they had a transition plan, and 11% did not know if one existed. Also not surprising was the fact that 22% of the students said they were not involved at all in writing their transition plans.

Attending college was a possible plan for 52% of the students who responded to the survey, but when asked if their transition plan included long-term goals for postsecondary education, only 35% of the students responded yes to that question. In



other words, some students hope to go to college but do not have any plans as to how they will accomplish this goal. Employment appeared to be a possibility for only 6.5% of the students for post-graduation. Fifty-two percent of the students responded that their transition plans included long term goals for finding a job, and 59% of the students reported that career awareness was one of the skills training programs offered by the special education department.

According to the professional staffs' survey, every child has an Individual Transition Plan, which 40% reported begins in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Twenty percent reported the process begins in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 20% also reported the process begins in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and 20% reported begins ASAP. One hundred percent of the professional staff rated the programs' overall degree of development, in the component of Individual Transition Plans as "in progress," and 80% reported that the program needed to develop more comprehensive transition plans. Forty percent reported that further development was "somewhat" of a priority. Also, 40% reported that the transition plan was developed as a group, consisting of parents, students, and other relevant parties participating. Twenty percent reported that there was no group participation, and 20% did not respond. Clearly, there appears to be a lack of communication between the professional staff who participated in the survey.

In terms of long-term goals, 100% of the professional staff reported that the Individual Transition Plans included goals in the areas of employment/postsecondary training or education, independent living, and/or community participation. Also, 100% of the professional staff reported that the ITP included sections to list activities to reach long-term goals, persons responsible, timelines, and progress on activities and 100% also reported that there were specific objectives/activities on each child's ITP.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As noted by Love et al. (1997), a number of studies have indicated that students who exit from special education frequently experience significant difficulty making the transition into adult life. Research has been conducted, in direct response to parent, teacher, student, and public concern over the applicability of academic, social, and vocational skills taught via special education and related services. The goal has been an attempt to focus the nation's resources and vision to help special education students achieve valued adult lifestyles.

As previously mentioned, a critical outcome associated with effective education appears to be a successful transition from school to adult life. Of the 46 students surveyed, only 9% were undecided as to what their plans were after graduation from high school. Unfortunately, most of the data collected conflicted with what the goals were and how prepared the students were to achieve their goals. This could be due to the fact that students go through the process of meeting with their teachers and case managers, partake in career awareness surveys, and even discuss plans for life after high school, but never really grasp the fact that this information is important. Again, the need to increase student awareness is extremely important if special education students are to make informed decisions about their future.

According to the New Jersey Administrative Code for Special Education (6A:14), every child is required to have a transition plan in place, beginning at age 14. The IEP team, the child, and his/her parents should devise this plan. Unfortunately, many youth remain dependent on their IEP team to make decisions for them and oftentimes parents do not become involved with this process. When the students at Sterling High School

were asked if they had a transition plan on the survey, 50% responded that they either did not have one or were not sure. This is not surprising since 67% of the students said that they were either somewhat involved, or not involved at all in writing their transition plan. If the students themselves were not involved in the process of writing their own individual transition plans, how would the individualization of each student's plan ensured?

It is evident, according to the survey, that the students at Sterling High School are exposed to skills training programs in order to help them make informed choices about their future. When speaking with the school's social worker, I was informed that beginning in their junior year, the special education students meet with a representative from the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. This is a voluntary program, meaning that the students, along with their parents, meet with the NJDVRS to map out plans for their future. The mission of the NJDVRS is to enable eligible individuals with disabilities to achieve an employment and/or educational outcome consistent with their strengths, priorities, needs, abilities, and capabilities. Its goal is to prepare and place in employment, eligible persons with disabilities who, because of the significance of their disabling condition, would otherwise be unable to secure and/or maintain employment. Furthermore, those students interested in continuing their education will receive financial assistance, based upon need.

The NJDVRS will provide information regarding the cost, accessibility, and length of potential services for each student. This is an extremely beneficial program for the students, but unfortunately, some students do not take advantage of the opportunity because their parents refuse to participate. With the help of the courts, it may be

appropriate for schools to step in and be advocates for these students. Another opportunity provided to the students at Sterling High School is the Career Awareness Program. This program is included in the child's IEP and is available during their access period, on a voluntary basis. Classified juniors and seniors have the opportunity to participate in field trips to such places as the Career Casino Institute and the State Police Academy. According to the survey, 59% of the students participated in the Career Awareness Program.

#### Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

As evident in the survey, many classified students believe that there will be an individualized plan for them once they leave high school. However, what it will be and who will be involved in making it remains the question. Some students take an active interest in their future, but unfortunately, a large majority of students allow others to plan for them and those plans do not always take into consideration the individual's interests.

The Special Education Department at Sterling High School provides the opportunity for students to participate in planning for their future. Having been involved in the department for the last 2 years, it became evident that the lack of involvement by parents/guardians, in writing a student's IEP, Transition Plan, and Exit Plan, was a serious problem. Those students who did not get involved in planning their high school years, did not take an interest in planning for their post-high school years, no matter how much effort was put forth by the department.

Before conducting the career awareness program, students should be polled to determine which careers interest them and then, they should visit at least one of those locations each semester. Each year the options should change since the students may

have visited a particular site the previous year. It should be mandatory for the parent/guardian to meet with their child's counselor each year so that both are taking a more active role in planning for the future. Also, before exiting the school, both the student and his/her parent(s) should sit down with the social worker to discuss the agencies available to them in the future. Each family should be involved in making a portfolio of agencies, services, phone numbers, and any other important contact personnel that may be involved in their child's future. This information should be part of a child's exit information so the family can feel confident that their child will be able to benefit from any program, in the future, if he/she chooses.

Within the last 10-15 years, the number of classified students has greatly increased. Fortunately, the number of opportunities, such as education and/or employment, has also increased. Preparing these students for life after high school continues to be a challenge for every educator. Students may have some idea of what they want for the future, but not everyone has the tools to attain their goals.

Because of NCLB, every school has to be accountable for the success of their special education students. Perhaps one way this could be achieved is for high schools to become more vocational in nature. Whether a child is classified, or in the regular education program, schools should be looking into helping their students learn valuable skills that can help them become more employable. There still needs to be further research conducted, to determine how schools can become more equipped, to prepare a larger school population for life after high school.

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