

## Teachers' View of Transition Services: Results from a Statewide Survey in South Carolina

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*Abstract:* This study examined high school and middle school transition practices from the perspective of special education teacher leaders. Results indicated that the majority of schools offer functional curricula, social skills training, and an array of school-based functional learning opportunities. However, a significant number of schools did not provide adequate employment skills development and functional assessment. In addition, agency involvement in transition planning was inadequate.

Transition from school to work was identified as a major federal priority in special education since the early 1980s. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) through transition systems change initiatives, such as The School-to-Work Initiative (Guy & Schriener, 1997), has served as the impetus for systemic changes in transition practices for post school settings, including work, postsecondary education and community living (Johnson & Halloran, 1997; Katsiyannis, deFur, & Conderman, 1998). States which have participated in systems change initiatives reported an increase (a) in awareness of transition needs and issues, (b) in participation of students with disabilities and parents in transition activities, (c) in collaborative relationships between school and community agencies, and (d) in policy development to support better transition services and outcomes (Guy & Schriener, 1997). Further, federal funding for these initiatives was found to be the best predictor for improvement in transition practices though "transition compliance efforts" appear to be focused more on the process (i.e., paperwork) than the provision of transition services (Baer, Simmons, & Flexer, 1996). Nonetheless, special education teachers, school ad-

ministrators, counselors, and agency personnel indicated that transition topics were discussed more frequently and significant progress had been made in transition planning and inter-agency collaboration (Roessler, 1996).

Schools generally report compliance with IDEA transition requirements with the exception of the requirement to reconvene the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team if transition services could not be provided as planned. School personnel must ensure that students with disabilities fully access and benefit from the general education curriculum and leave our school systems prepared to successfully participate in postsecondary education, enter meaningful employment, live independently in communities, and pursue lifelong learning opportunities (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002). Early transition planning, student/parent involvement and ownership of plans, age and goal appropriate environments, and a current directory of transition resources have been emphasized as essential elements in effective practices (Afee & Greenawalt, 2001; see also McDonnell, Hardman, & McDonnell, 2003). Additional components include a focus on community outcomes, and interagency collaboration (Morningstar, Kleinhammer, & Latin, 1999). Although school districts always retain responsibility for school-aged transition services (McAfee & Greenawalt), the existence

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of a school-based interagency transition team was the strongest predictor of compliance and best practice (Mahan & Baer, 2001).

A variety of models have been developed and implemented to facilitate successful transition. For example, the Transition Service Integration Model combines the resources of public schools, rehabilitation, and developmental disability systems during the student's last year at school (Certo et al., 2003); Project RENEW provides for comprehensive case coordination for the participants' ongoing education, employment, social/emotional development, and community adjustment (participants made improvements in high school completion, enrollment in postsecondary education programs, hours worked per week, and in their hourly wages) (Malloy, Cheney, & Cormier, 1998); Teaching All Students Skills for Employment and Life involves a multilevel interagency transition planning process which includes three levels - a community-level team, school-level team, and individual-level team (evaluation data indicated consumer satisfaction) (Aspel, Bettis, Quinn, Test, & Wood, 1999).

In addition, specific practices, such as an emphasis on vocational training and interagency collaboration, have resulted in significant outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Harvey (2002) found that individuals with disabilities who participated in vocational education while in high school earned more wages than their peers with disabilities who did not participate in vocational education. Karpinski, Neubert, and Graham (1992) found that graduates had worked proportionately more time since high school than dropouts and had been employed in their current job more than twice as long (phone interviews were conducted 21 and 28 months after leaving school). Wehman (2002) also emphasized the need for students to secure competitive employment before leaving school by establishing partnerships between schools and public agencies and private sector as well as expanded postsecondary education opportunities. Financial incentives for public and private colleges that enroll, support, and graduate students with disabilities are perhaps a means to address this issue (Wehman).

A persistent challenge in planning and implementing transition services has been the

capacity and training of special education teachers and other school based professionals (see Johnson & Rusch, 1993). Bull, Montgomery, and Beard (1994) pointed out that teacher education programs in colleges and universities must be charged with the responsibilities of adequately preparing special education teachers to plan, implement, and evaluate transition programs. Knott and Asselin (1999) investigated perceptions of 214 secondary teachers of students with mild disabilities in terms of (a) their knowledge of transition, (b) family and student involvement in transition, and (c) importance of transition. Findings indicated that teachers understood the problems, issues, concepts, and definitions related to transition; and placed high importance on family and student involvement in transition planning. However, most teachers had little knowledge of adult agencies' eligibility requirements or roles of these agencies in transition planning; demonstrated low knowledge and involvement in linkages with adult services; and did not know how to accomplish linkages between secondary school activities and adult options. Based on these findings, Knott and Asselin suggest that preservice and inservice programs need to address the lack of knowledge and involvement in interagency collaboration.

The current investigation examined high school and middle school transition practices from the perspective of special education teachers. Surveys were utilized to determine the types and levels of transition services available for students with special education needs in the State of South Carolina.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The population sampled was the department leader or special education teacher of each middle school and each high school in South Carolina. Participants included 105 middle and high school teachers across South Carolina who completed and returned the survey. Among the participants, 95 (91%) were special education teachers, 2 (2%) were vocational teachers, and 8 (7%) identified themselves as other, including special education

consultant, transition facilitator, employment specialist, counselor, speech language pathologist, placement chair, and special needs coordinator. The types of settings that they taught in included resource ( $n = 37, 35\%$ ), self-contained ( $n = 43, 41\%$ ), inclusion ( $n = 1, 1\%$ ), itinerant ( $n = 3, 3\%$ ), multiple settings ( $n = 13, 12\%$ ), and other ( $n = 13, 12\%$ ).

*Instrument*

The second author and staff of Project SIGHT (South Carolina Transition Systems Change Project) developed the survey using the format of an earlier survey conducted by Project SIGHT in 1997. The earlier survey was developed with input and reviews from special education coordinators and personnel representing the University of South Carolina Center for Excellence, the SC Department of Education, local education agencies, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Developmental Disabilities Council, Office of the Governor. Survey items were generated based on a review of the literature on valued transition practices, which addressed service coordination, key stakeholders' involvements, linkages to service agencies, adult service agencies' participations, work-based experiences, school-based experiences, transportation, and transition service categories. Items in the survey were divided into three sections. Section I collected data on participants' background information; which included their professional role, instructional setting, and the grade levels and number of students they had in their classes. Section II asked respondents to report how services were provided in their district. Questions included "who coordinates transition programs in the district, transition coordinator/specialist's responsibilities, regular participants of IEP/transition plan meetings, and agencies that provided information or assistance to them. In Section III, respondents were asked to check services and experiences that students received (see Table 1). These included work-based experiences, school-based skills training, types of businesses that students were employed, and percentages of time students were employed. In addition, respondents rated how well their district addressed each of 15 transition service

**TABLE 1**

**Types of Work-Based Experiences or Information that Students Received Assistance**

<i>Type of Experiences or Information</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
School-based work experiences	86	81.9
Receiving career information	74	70.5
Vocational/occupational courses	73	69.5
Job shadowing	70	66.7
Assistance from job coach	59	56.2
Volunteer work	53	50.5
Service learning	50	47.6
Community-based training	50	47.6
Supported employment	38	36.2
Internship	27	25.7
Other	6	5.7

categories. These categories are listed in Table 3.

*Data Collection and Analysis*

The staff of Project SIGHT mailed surveys to each of the 206 high schools, 227 middle school and four junior high school special education department coordinators or lead teachers in the state of South Carolina. Department leaders/teachers were asked to complete the survey and return it within a one-month period in a self-addressed stamped envelope included. At the conclusion of the one-month window, follow-up letters were mailed to each of the survey recipients to encourage follow-through. Returned surveys were coded and entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

Three types of statistical analyses were conducted. First, frequency and descriptive statistics were calculated to obtain an overall summary of the data. Second, crosstabulation analyses were conducted to examine relationships between teachers' responses and their instructional settings and between teachers' responses and grade levels. Third, inferential analyses were conducted to examine teachers' ratings on their school's transition services in relation to their instructional settings and grade levels.

## Results

### *How Were Transition Services Provided in the District?*

Respondents were asked to identify the responsible person who coordinated transition programming in their district/school. Responses varied, including 46 (43.8%) transition coordinator, 23 (21.9%) multiple personnel, 18 (17.1%) special education director/coordinator, 13 (12.4%) special education classroom teacher, 2 (1.9%) guidance counselor, and 3 (2.9%) other. According to these respondents, their district's transition coordinator carried multiple responsibilities. These included establishing employment site for students with disabilities ( $n = 50, 47.6\%$ ), facilitating student job placement ( $n = 49, 46.7\%$ ), facilitating student assessment ( $n = 41, 39\%$ ), providing supported employment services ( $n = 41, 39\%$ ), facilitating teacher training for special education transition curriculum and services ( $n = 36, 34.3\%$ ), and others ( $n = 8, 7.6\%$ ).

Special education teachers were checked by 87.6% ( $n = 92$ ) of the respondents as usually present at students' IEP/transition planning meetings, followed by parents ( $n = 90, 85.7\%$ ), general education teachers ( $n = 84, 80\%$ ), the student ( $n = 83, 79\%$ ), guidance counselors ( $n = 68, 64.8\%$ ), and job coaches ( $n = 33, 31.4\%$ ). In terms of agencies' involvement, more than half ( $n = 72, 68.6\%$ ) of the respondents checked Vocational Rehabilitation Department, 58 (55.2%) Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, 33 (31.4%) Department of Mental Health, and 29 (27.6%) checked Department of Social Services. Other agencies that were reported included, Continuum of Care ( $n = 18, 17.1\%$ ), South Carolina Services Information System ( $n = 11, 10.5\%$ ), Social Security Administration ( $n = 10, 9.5\%$ ), and Health Department ( $n = 9, 8.6\%$ ).

### *Transition Services and Experiences Students Received*

Respondents were asked to check the types of work-based experiences or information that their students with special needs received assistance with through the school district. These data are summarized in Table 1. As

shown in Table 1, school-based work experiences was the most common experiences students with special needs received from their school district, followed by receiving career information, and vocational/occupational courses. Internship and supported employment were the two least common experiences that students received from their school district. Respondents were also asked to check the types of school-based training skills their students received at school. These data are summarized and ranked from the most common to the least common in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, functional skills curriculum was overwhelmingly identified followed by social skills curriculum and independent living skills curriculum.

Regarding what types of businesses were the students employed, more than half ( $n = 69, 65.7\%$ ) checked grocery store, followed by fast food, ( $n = 65, 61.9\%$ ), restaurant ( $n = 58, 55.2\%$ ), service industry ( $n = 38, 36.2\%$ ), construction ( $n = 30, 28.6\%$ ), and manufacturing ( $n = 24, 22.9\%$ ). Farming was the least reported business ( $n = 9, 8.6\%$ ). Sixty-four respondents answered the questions "How does your district provide transportation for students to and from work/training?" Of those who responded, 5 (7.8%) reported using teacher personal vehicle, 22 (34.4%) reported using activity bus, 9 (14.1%) reported using

**TABLE 2**  
**Types of School-Based Training Skills Students Received at School**

<i>School-Based Training Skills</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Functional curriculum (daily living skills, job seeking/keeping skills, etc.)	94	89.5
Social skills curriculum	74	70.5
Independent living skills curriculum	72	68.6
Vocational/occupational skills curriculum	71	67.6
Assessment (interviews, career occupational profile, etc.)	69	65.7
School-to-work education	63	60.0
Employability skills curriculum	60	57.1
Other	2	1.9

school bus, and 28 (43.8%) reported using other types of transportations.

*Quality of School/District Services*

Respondents were asked to rate how well their school or district addressed each of 15 statements regarding transition education/services. The rating scale consisted of five choices ranging from 0 to 4: 0 = not addressed by school, 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. The 15 statements and descriptive statistics for each statement are summarized in Table 3. As shown in Table 3, individualized education/transition plan, vocational/occupational skills curriculum, and functional curriculum seem to be addressed better than other issues. Six transition issues were reportedly not addressed by over 10 percent of the districts/schools. These included internship, job coaching, supported employment, community-based instruction service learning experiences, and employability skills.

To examine whether respondents from different school levels rated differently, we con-

ducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The dependent variable was rating total (sum of all 15 ratings). The independent variable was school level (including 21 middle school, 54 high school, and 10 multiple level). The one-way ANOVA yielded an *F* value of 7.50 ( $p < .005$ ), which indicated a significant difference. Further multiple comparison analysis using Scheffe procedure detected differences existed between high school and multiple level (mean difference = 14.11,  $p < .005$ ) and between middle school and multiple level (mean difference = 11.84,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine whether respondents' ratings were different based on their instructional settings (self-contained, resource room, and others). Results of the analysis did not reveal any significant differences.

**Discussion**

Research demonstrates that existence of specific transition practices appear to be directly related to student success in postsecondary environments (Harvey, 2002; Karpinski et al.,

**TABLE 3**  
**Respondent's Ratings on How Well Their School/District Addressed 15 Transition Issues**

<i>Transition Issue</i>	<i>Number and Percentage on Each Response</i>				
	SA	A	D	SD	NO
Individualized education/transition plan ( <i>n</i> = 98)	29 (30)	55 (56)	8 (8)	2 (2)	4 (4)
School-to-work education ( <i>n</i> = 98)	18 (18)	51 (52)	16 (16)	6 (6)	7 (7)
Functional curriculum ( <i>n</i> = 99)	24 (24)	52 (53)	17 (17)	2 (2)	4 (4)
Support employment ( <i>n</i> = 96)	13 (14)	38 (40)	17 (18)	9 (8)	19 (20)
Community-based instruction ( <i>n</i> = 97)	18 (19)	44 (45)	18 (19)	4 (4)	13 (13)
Assessment ( <i>n</i> = 97)	21 (22)	55 (57)	13 (13)	6 (6)	2 (2)
Social skills curriculum ( <i>n</i> = 98)	21 (21)	48 (49)	23 (24)	1 (1)	5 (5)
Independent living skills curriculum ( <i>n</i> = 97)	20 (21)	53 (55)	17 (17)	1 (1)	6 (6)
Vocational/occupational skills curriculum ( <i>n</i> = 97)	25 (26)	46 (47)	12 (12)	8 (8)	5 (5)
Employability skills curriculum ( <i>n</i> = 97)	20 (21)	40 (41)	23 (24)	4 (4)	10 (10)
Internship ( <i>n</i> = 94)	9 (10)	32 (34)	25 (27)	6 (6)	22 (23)
Job coaching ( <i>n</i> = 98)	23 (23)	30 (31)	19 (19)	6 (6)	20 (21)
Service learning experiences ( <i>n</i> = 97)	17 (18)	44 (45)	22 (23)	3 (3)	11 (11)
Providing career information ( <i>n</i> = 96)	22 (23)	49 (51)	11 (12)	9 (9)	5 (5)
Transition education for compliance to special education legislation ( <i>n</i> = 94)	17 (18)	52 (55)	15 (16)	3 (3)	7 (8)

*Note.* SA = strongly agree, A = agree, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree, NO = not addressed. Numbers in parentheses are percentages based on number of responses.

1992). The purpose of this investigation was to identify whether, from the perspectives of special education department leaders/teachers, schools in the State of South Carolina are applying transition best practices as generally defined by researchers and practitioners (e.g., Guy & Schriener, 1997; Afee & Greenawalt, 2001; Mahan & Baer, 2001). The outcomes of the study provide a snapshot of transition practices in South Carolina.

#### *Participant Background Information*

Results indicated that most school districts have identified someone to serve as a transition point-person. Identifying such a person is significant because it is an indicator of the relative importance school districts placed on transition and the visibility of such a position. These individuals often assume multiple roles. For instance, in addition to serving as the technical assistance and training staff for the district, they are also often responsible for direct student services such as job coaching and development and student assessment. The assumption of multiple roles may be especially beneficial when responsibilities cross special education and general education lines. For example, a transition coordinator who also serves as a district vocational coordinator often has greater access to general education programs and resources.

#### *District Service Provision*

Findings from this survey also point to several areas of concern. Specifically, level of student participation in transition planning appears inadequate. Survey respondents indicated that only 79% of students attended such meetings. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) concluded that a student's active participation in the IEP meeting results in high degree of engagement. Wehmeyer (1998) points out that (a) active participation in the IEP process makes the student more motivated to pursue goals that they have helped select and (b) students who are involved in setting goals have more positive outcomes related to achieving those goals than with goals selected by others. Additionally, it seems that agency representatives are attending only a select number of transition plan-

ning meetings. Although research constantly emphasizes the importance of rehabilitation counselors' involvement in transition planning (e.g., Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002), Vocational Rehabilitation is present at meetings in barely more than half of the schools. More disturbingly, the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Mental Health, and other agencies are absent from the transition process in the majority of the schools. This is certainly an area that needs to be addressed in order to bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary environments. Research findings have consistently documented that effective transition programs involve a strong collaboration component whereas lack of interagency collaboration often becomes a barrier to effective transition planning and services (Kohler, 1998). Interestingly enough, though Vocational Rehabilitation presence was noted in more than half of the schools, students do not appear to be receiving supported employment services (community-based) during their school years. However, participants noted that students are being provided with school-based work experiences in an overwhelming majority (81.9%) of schools.

In sum, the majority of schools in South Carolina report that they are not providing adequate employment skill development for their students. This finding is most serious when research indicates time and time again that while employment levels for adults with disabilities fall well below those of other citizens (Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities, 1999) work experience and placement during high school is directly correlated to post-school employment success (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002). Further, more than half of schools have students involved in the food industry (i.e., restaurant or grocery stores). This limited array of employment options may be the result of students being placed in available, convenient jobs in lieu of matching individual student interests to specially selected positions.

In contrast, schools in South Carolina are successful in providing school-based functional skills development opportunities to students. Nearly 90% of schools reported that they offer functional curricula for students and over 70% report offering a social skills

curriculum. In addition, over two thirds report offering an array of school-based functional learning opportunities (i.e., independent living skills, vocational and vocational related skills, and daily living skills). Unfortunately, about one-third failed to indicate that they provide functional assessments, a critical step in providing an individualized, appropriate transition program for students with disabilities.

Findings from this study should be viewed with caution as they represent transition practices in South Carolina. Findings also represent the perspective of primarily special education teachers and only a fraction (about 25%) of teachers participated in the study. In addition, because only lead teachers were targeted, it is possible that an underlying level of responsibility for transition programming could have skewed responses. Further research is needed to ensure that alternate perspectives from other professionals involved in the process (transition coordinators, school-based and agency personnel), parents, and students are investigated so that an accurate and comprehensive view of transition practices in South Carolina is possible.

In summary, findings regarding transition practices in South Carolina (despite the study's limitations) allow for preliminary observations. Results indicated that the majority of schools offer functional curricula, social skills training, and an array of school-based functional learning opportunities. However, a significant number of schools did not provide adequate employment skills development and functional assessment. In addition, agency involvement in transition planning was inadequate. Finally, broadening the base of survey participants to additional stakeholders involved in the transition process along with improved levels of participation will allow for a more comprehensive (and potentially more accurate) view of transition services.

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