

TRANSITION INSTITUTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EMPLOYMENT TRACK

What's Working Now?

Maryland has some high quality, strong collaborations with a wide variety of stakeholders that are currently in operation and working well. Keeping lines of communication open among all partners has resulted in high quality internship programs, bringing all partners to the IEP table, and enhancing partner visibility in the schools. By connecting with students early, career assessments are occurring while students are still in school. DORS staff are being included in IEP meetings at the appropriate time. There are several successful Summer Youth Employment Programs and internship programs for transitioning youth, as well as strong mentoring and job shadowing opportunities. Early assessments for assistive technology are being done while students are still in school, and training on the use of this technology is being provided before students leave school, with information on the effectiveness of this technology being shared between school and adult service agencies. There are some effective strategies in place to help youth gain the essential work habits that employers are looking for, including checklists, the 'Hula Hoop' strategy for visualization of appropriate personal space, and getting evaluative feedback from summer work experiences, informational interviews, and job shadowing experiences. We are also building relationships with employers by listening to their needs. As a result, students are learning the value of work and are gaining valuable paid work experiences while still in school. In short, Maryland is moving towards seamless transition for our youth.

What could we do to improve employment outcomes of youth?

There are steps Maryland can take to improve our services to transitioning youth. We need to do more to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and engaged in the transition process, and that families are included as one of those stakeholders. We need to increase our visibility in the community to help employers to understand how they can benefit from these partnerships. Students need more self-advocacy models and instruction while still in school, and parents also need instruction to better help their students see their strengths and positive attributes, which in turn will help parents to empower their students to speak and advocate for themselves. Parents also need education on the support systems that are available once their students leave school and that can begin while students are still in school. Parents need help to counter concerns about benefits and to understand how they can help in fostering a smooth transition.

Work experiences need to start earlier, and clarification is needed regarding liability and unpaid work experience. Businesses need a clearer understanding of working with people with disabilities and what constitutes a reasonable accommodation. We need to begin collecting assessment data earlier, and develop an assessment approach that would establish accepted standards across disciplines, thus preventing the need to repeat formal assessments after students leave school. Adopting the evidence based philosophy that all can work would help to change the mindset of professionals working in transition, as long as we build in flexibility in recognizing the uniqueness of adolescence. Once our students are placed on the job, we need to assure that they understand the safety requirements of the job. We need to help develop transportation strategies, including travel training for public transportation, prior to students leaving school. To assist students in building self-determination skills, we need to help them in setting realistic goals with obtainable benchmarks on their IEPs. We need to involve students in their IEPs, and provide them with ample opportunities to articulate their needs. Students need greater ownership of their accommodation needs, which will then help them to better articulate the importance of these accommodations, including assistive technology, in the

post-school setting. This will also increase self-awareness and move towards greater self-advocacy. We need to do more to provide for skill building activities to prepare students for the work world while they are still in school. This would include such things as time management training, practicing travel to the job, planning for contingencies (such as traffic jams, bad weather), carrying emergency contact information, respecting personal space, and developing coping mechanisms for dealing with the consequences of their actions. Students need time in school devoted to work-related skills, including career awareness, awareness of transportation options, and developing proactive relationships. We need to develop more flexible funding for such skills training, perhaps allowing for Work Adjustment Training to be exempt from the DORS financial means test, and more flexible funding through the school systems to provide for these types of services. In short, there needs to be an acceptance that no one agency can do everything, and agencies need to do a better job of sharing the financial burden in providing for these services before students leave school.

In working with specific employers, we need a greater understanding of their application and interview policies. We should be providing our youth with a 'cheat sheet' of essential information to take with them when they are filling out a job application, as well as with coaching on conversational skills; i.e., negotiating around 'chit-chat' during an interview or when going to fill out an application. The best service we can provide to our transitioning youth is to provide them with job search training as early as possible. This can be accomplished through career development modules, career prep courses as class electives, financial training classes for all students prior to graduation, and bolstered vocational training programs. We need to follow this with increasing opportunities for paid work experiences while students are still in school. We should expand apprenticeship programs to allow students to have the opportunity to choose professional and educational routes.

What are some recommended next steps that can be acted upon following this Institute?

The Transition Institute helped transitioning professionals to draw some significant conclusions and begin to develop strategies to improve services to our transitioning youth. Communication among partners is key to a successful transition. Regular meetings of all essential partners with school personnel are critical. It may be beneficial to have separate meetings for diploma-bound vs. certificate-bound students, as their service needs are quite different. However, since staff are already attending a great number of meetings, it may be more beneficial to focus on better defining the purposes and goals of these meetings so that partners all understand their roles and functions .

Funding for Summer Youth Employment programs needs to be continued.

Some universal themes emerged from these discussions: 1)Parents need to be involved early to help them better understand the importance of self-advocacy and independence. 2) We need greater flexibility and creativity in our various systems, to assure that students and their parents are provided with meaningful information that can be translated into the post-school environment. 3) Self-determination instruction and practice needs a greater focus while students are still in school. This should include educating students on the ADA and reasonable accommodations so that they know their rights and what is applicable to them in a work setting.

To accomplish all of this, we all need to do a better job of sharing resources with all stakeholders. We need to replicate outstanding models that are currently working, such as Project SEARCH, Start on Success, and Summer Youth Employment Programs, and we need to build better collaborative practices for partnerships. It would also be helpful for DORS to expand their resources for transitioning youth on their website, to include a listing of these exemplary programs.

POST-SECONDARY TRACK

What's working now?

Maryland's school systems have set high expectations for our students, which fosters a greater sense of commitment from them. We have some strong programs on college campuses that require extensive collaboration with partners to offer non-credit offerings for students while still in high school. DORS' In-school funds can be used for such programs. Some examples of these programs which allow for parallel enrollment in college courses while still in high school include Single Step in Baltimore County, Project Access in Howard County, and the Pathways Program for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. These programs include both academic and practical aspects of transition, and many of these students have been able to move on to four year schools. We have some strong collaborative efforts in which DORS, school system personnel, and DDA meet to track DDA services, to assure that these students are connecting with adult service providers, and to help plan for a smooth transition.

We are providing for cross-training of transition personnel and special education teachers, although the challenge is still to put this knowledge into practice to make sure that all students with disabilities receive a variety of transition assessment options. Maryland State Department of Education is infusing the Career Development Framework into school-based counseling and related activities at all grade levels, and will begin portfolio development as early as sixth grade. School systems are utilizing service learning requirements, mentoring, and job shadowing programs to provide opportunities for students to try new things and to link them to employers. Providing for paid opportunities linked to these activities then makes them more meaningful to the students. Students are being invited by law to IEP meetings; however, more needs to be done to incorporate self-determination skills training into the curriculum. Professionals such as VR counselors attempt to infuse self-determination into their interactions with students by having individual sessions with the students, before meeting with their parents. They focus on the employment goal and hold the students accountable for any homework or preparation needed for follow-up appointments. We are providing for assistive technology for students while they are still in school, and are giving students the opportunity to try out that technology in a variety of settings to see what will be most beneficial in a post-secondary setting. We focus on job readiness skills through the use of worksheets and checklists, and discuss barriers to employment before settling on an employment goal. Students who receive Social Security benefits are provided with benefits counseling early to help clarify any benefits issues that may arise related to employment. Maryland schools have strong Career and Tech Ed programs that provide for soft skills as well as vocational skills. There needs to be a push to make these soft skills mandatory for all not just this program. Our schools also offer career research and development class components that include resume writing, mock interviews, cover letters, etc. In preparing students for the job application and interview process, we set a standard of professionalism during sessions with the students, and help them with self-marketing – the 'total packaging' of their presentation to the employer. They can then apply these skills in summer or other paid work experiences. To develop these opportunities, we are building relationships with employers through activities such as Disability Mentoring Day, internships, volunteer experiences, and youth recruitment programs. These activities also provide for career awareness and exploration for our students. We also have representatives on several local Chambers of Commerce, which allows for greater networking with employers. There are some truly exemplary programs and practices in Maryland, such as the CTE/Special Education partnership in Cecil County use of portfolios as an ongoing assessment of the student's skills and abilities, active DORS involvement in the schools, Transition Fairs, DORS in-school funding, and work experience programs. There are also exemplary summer programs that focus on preparing students with disabilities for post-secondary education.

What could we do to improve employment outcomes of youth?

There are things we can be doing to improve partnerships and services for transitioning youth. A one-stop bonding program is needed for youth with criminal backgrounds. Exemplary programs that provide for college preparation, such as MAST for students with Learning Disabilities and ACE which helps with organizational skills, provides for college visits, and provides for education on the college application and financial aid process, need to be expanded and replicated. Creative and expanded funding is needed to extend successful programs such as Pathways and Project Access to locations that are not currently receiving them. Getting that roadmap to post-secondary education early on is vital to success. We need to do a better job of disseminating information on these programs, and others like them, to local schools, students, and their parents, utilizing technology wherever possible to disseminate the information to a wider audience. There is also a need for increased funding to provide these opportunities to more students.

It is important that we share information with partners with greater openness, without hoarding resources. Professional respect and responsiveness is critical in maintaining positive relationships and continuing to work productively, keeping our focus on the needs of the students rather than on bureaucratic concerns and agendas. Through open dialogue and problem-solving approaches, we can better partner for creative solutions and build more productive professional relationships. There is also a need for greater parent education on such topics as understanding of disability, differences between public education supports and college/university supports, IDEA vs. ADA, and eligibility vs. entitlement. Students likewise need training and opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills through such avenues as summer college prep programs and student-led IEPs. We also need to improve and expand our liaison relationships with colleges and universities, as well as increase visibility at Job Fairs, to encourage our students to move into professional positions. When providing assessment to transitioning students, we need to utilize informal assessments as well as formal ones. When we are sharing assessment results with these students, we need to assure that the results are communicated to students in a way that they can understand. We need to standardize practices from successful programs to make them available statewide, such as pre-college experiences that have incorporated internships (like the Young Scholar's Program or Project Access). It would also be helpful to fully investigate and evaluate these programs' effectiveness, to better determine components that should be replicated.

A formalized mentoring program that is sustainable needs to be developed and supported. Students need a greater understanding of what accommodations and supports they are currently receiving and what they might need in a post-secondary setting. Students need to be prepared for meetings; this can be modeled through individual interaction with teachers. This will teach them how to articulate and advocate in regards to their disability and to reflect on current accommodations. We need to better involve and educate parents in the process, utilizing such resources as webcasts, parent meetings, word of mouth networking, and transition conference sessions specifically for parents. Transitioning students also need increased supports in employment settings. We need to provide for work experiences while students are still in school, whether it be through paid summer jobs, work-study programs, job shadow experiences, volunteer experiences, or Work Adjustment Training. This can also be accomplished through service learning hours in a locale in which students have a vested interest. To better prepare students for the job application and interview process, they need opportunities to practice these skills at school. Agencies should have the same expectations as employers, and set a good example by modeling appropriate behaviors. We need to help students understand what is feasible and realistic in vocational pursuits. Mock interviews should be conducted with actual business partners so students can get realistic feedback from real employers. When building these business partnerships, we need to keep the business needs in mind and match those needs to the resources of the student. Recognize employers when they make a significant contribution. We need to keep lines of communication open, during times when difficulties arise as well as during successes. When we reach out to businesses, we need to be mindful to what is the best time for them. In

building successful business partnerships, we can then increase opportunities for work-based experiences for students with disabilities.

What are some recommended next steps that can be acted upon following this Institute?

The Transition Institute made it clear that we need to provide education to parents and families on self-advocacy, self-determination, and understanding of disability. More importantly, parents and families also need a greater understanding of the differences between public and post-secondary education programs, especially in the documentation changes for students (IDEA vs. ADA). Disability Support Services need to have a greater presence at college fairs to increase understanding of the services available to students with disabilities. Programs such as the Pathways Program should not only be replicated, but the model should also be expanded to other underserved populations such as youth with mental illness. Partnerships like the CTE/Special Ed partnership in Cecil County should be replicated in other areas as well. Since funding to expand transitioning programs is sorely needed, legislators need to be educated on transition issues.

We also need to provide for such things as drama workshops to teach self-advocacy skills, in addition to encouraging students to be actively involved in the IEP process and to voice their opinions. Students also need to be actively engaged in development of portfolios, which will then give them a product that they can understand and that will help them to formulate the questions they need to ask at various stages of the transition process. Parents need to be approached as equal partners in the process; professionals and school personnel therefore need to move past the adversarial nature that school-parent interactions have taken in the past. By involving parents, self-advocacy can then be taught through individual interaction and modeling behaviors to facilitate self-advocacy. Further, expecting more from students when they attend sessions with professionals will foster greater self-advocacy as well. We also need to use the service learning hours requirement as part of the career exploration process for work-based experiences. Benefits counseling needs to be incorporated into vocational counseling and career preparation sessions.

It became clear through the Institute that all partners need to communicate openly and clearly delineate the roles they play in order to ensure effective collaboration. We need to spotlight best practices, and encourage replication of programs that have proven successful. Resources need to be readily available to all partners at a centralized location. It would be helpful to provide for an employer panel for parents so that they can hear what employers are looking for from youthful workers. The DORS website could expand their resources for transitioning youth on their website, to include these resources as well as information on the exemplary summer programs that focus on preparing students with disabilities for post-secondary education.