



# Each and Every Child

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## Making transitions

*School revamps program to ensure students succeed after school*

The Emmetsburg High School special education team had a collision with reality. They knew they had a great transitions program – on paper. But then the northwest Iowa staff discovered that their students on Individualized Education Programs were not doing nearly so well in their post-high school years as they had assumed.

It started five years ago when the team, after being selected for a state grant called Model Employment Transitions Site, decided to get into the nitty gritty of their outcomes.

“We thought we were doing great stuff,” said Deena Fries, the middle school special education teacher. “The students had awesome plans, we thought. But we found out that when the students left here, we realized that everything fell apart.”

One student, in particular, threw Fries for a loop.

“On paper, she was very successful,” she said. “And we thought, ‘wow, we



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

*The Emmetsburg special education team talk about their newfound success in transitioning students out of school.*

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Rebecca Kjellsen

Deena Fries



Shalene Naig



Mike Embrock

started you out so well.' And today, she has several children, lives in a low-income rental, isn't employed.

"We needed to examine why this was happening."

And they did.

"We found that we were doing a lot of good things," Fries said. "We just needed to put them together with the right emphasis."

One of the first things they looked into was why students would quit a job once they graduated from school.

"They may have gotten the job through the school, such as working at McDonald's," Fries said. "When they exited school, the student may very well have been thinking, 'I don't want to do this.' The students needed more overall input and ownership into their career planning."

Thus, the school started what they call Positive Personal Profiles, or P3's. Simply put, they are personal reflections – something that the district itself has embraced and expanded all the way down to the fifth grade for both special education and general education kids.

"This needed to be for all the kids," said Principal Mike Embrock. "The P3 explores, 'What are you going to do

with your life?' 'What is your plan?'"

Doing the P3's isn't a one-time deal, but used regularly to see if interests are changing. From there, students explore fields that match their interests. The goal is to work toward all high school students having job shadowing, internship, and career exploration opportunities, as well as possibly visit the various companies and organizations.

Perhaps most important, the school involves parents in this process, something that took some initial coaxing to get them through the building's doors.

"The normal time we see parents is during an IEP meeting in which we have a team of people here," Embrock said. "It is overwhelming and even scary for a lot of our parents. There are a lot of negatives."

The school instead created a family engagement night in which agencies were set up at tables, and students and parents were given 10-minute slots to meet with all of them. In addition to showing families what was available, there were some unintended yet positive consequences.

"A parent learned that he himself could receive services through Iowa Workforce," said Becky Kjellsen, a

high school special education teacher and instructional coach. "The family engagement night was so nonthreatening. It was one of the biggest things we have done. It was such a positive experience for everyone."

And parent-teacher conferences became less foreboding.

"Since we started using the P3's, the conferences are more positive," Fries said.

Beyond academics and building career interests, teachers also focus on soft skills – anything from making eye contact, shaking a hand to learning how to interview.

Shalene Naig, a high school special education teacher, who works with Level 1-3 students, said that even before the students start job shadowing, she emphasizes the soft skills to ensure the students are ready to meet potential employers.

"A lot of these students are not exposed to working," she said. "I work to expose them to all kinds of career

choices, and get it into their mind frame, 'What do I want to do after school when I leave this building?'"

You don't have to ask 16-year-old Zach Doidge what he wants to do. The Emmetsburg junior has his career pared down to two possibilities: something in law enforcement or a welder.

"All of my family members have been in some kind of military training," he said. "I would like to do something that helps people. And welding is interesting – it pays pretty well. With a degree from Iowa Lakes Community College, it ends up paying \$25 an hour."

Doidge is already quite familiar with working, having stocked and bagged at a grocery store – a job he enjoys.

"I like it because I am the type of person who loves chatting," he said. "I used to be real shy, but I've learned that you need to speak out and speak your mind and do what you want to do."

As for Emmetsburg High School, don't expect any future collisions with reality.



*Junior Zach Doidge has his eyes set on a career in law enforcement or welding when he's done with high school.*

"We are going to follow up with our students several times," Embrock said. "We want to know what is working, what isn't, and to make sure to correct things if necessary."

## Get to know your community. No, really.

Careers are seldom random. And a successful career undoubtedly requires a lot of forethought and planning.

But when you put the special education lens over that, it can leave educators, administrators, parents and students alike squirming. After all, where do you start in getting students on Individualized Education Programs ready for life after high school? Work? Living arrangements?

Training? College?

All of the above. That's the answer that a small northeast Iowa high school arrived at once they realized they had scarcely tapped their area's resources. Readyng a student for life after high school graduation – called transition – requires a lot of planning and knowledge of one's community.

Just don't assume you really know what's available.

"During our PLC (Professional Learning Community), the special education teachers and the guidance counselor found that transition was an area we felt needed more emphasis," said Pam Ostwinkle, a 7th grade through 12th grade special education teacher at the Edgewood-Colesburg High School in Edgewood.

"Transition is an ongoing part of our job, and we used to think we knew what was available in services for our

graduating students," she said. "But Stephanie Maury, our Area Education Agency representative, suggested we bring in different agencies for informational sessions. It was an epiphany. It turns out we were barely scratching the surface."

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**"When they graduate, it's no longer 'oh, are they going to be all right?'"**

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Judi Simon, a special education teacher and instructional coach at Edgewood-Colesburg, said learning more about the community was a game changer.

"We help students with transitions for living, learning, and working and we wanted the students to be prepared and advocate for themselves," she said. "We wanted to learn about the resources for this area since the school is in Clayton County and across the highway is Delaware County."

The group focused on agencies that provided living and working opportunities, as well as two- and four-year colleges.

"We administered career-readiness tests," Simon said. "Once they realized they could do that test, it gave them an idea that perhaps they could go on in their education. We then delved into four-year and two-year schools to teach them the difference and the opportunities that go with each."

They also had to educate their general education colleagues.

"It is helpful that gen. ed. teachers know that a particular student is planning on going on beyond high school," Ostwinkle said.

And then there were the parents.

"We brought parents and students in to meet with the agencies," Ostwinkle said. "We had food and the agencies brought in information. It was really helpful."

Beyond the area agencies, Simon said it's important to pay attention to the local workforce, as well.

"Understand there is a workforce looking for trained individuals," she said. "This whole thing has changed our mindsets regarding transition."

We are now working IEP goals into summer work. This past summer, we had someone work as a personal shopper, work at a nursing home, work in laundry, wash windows. It gives them a chance to get experience – and get a sense of what they like to do."

Though they focused the past year on high school students, they plan to expand the program down to the seventh grade – if not eventually even younger. And they are excited.

"When they graduate, it's no longer 'oh, are they going to be all right?'" Ostwinkle said. "You have to have a plan. It's all about living, learning and working. And finding the right agencies and businesses to make it happen."

## 2015 Winterset homecoming queen Shea Byrd



Photo courtesy KCCI TV

In an open letter to the school district, the Byrd family said they were touched.

"The selfless act of nominating Shea and the Homecoming Court and then championing her selection as the Homecoming Queen demonstrates the level of social integrity, leadership and pride we can all celebrate and share in this community."