

Improving Transition Outcomes

An Innovative State Alignment Grant for Improving Transition Outcomes
for Youth with Disabilities Through the Use of Intermediaries

Henry County Transition Partners

Vision

A countywide system of inclusion, support, and engagement supports Henry County youth with disabilities as they transition into their adult roles in the community.

Team

Area Education Agency
Department of Human Services
Evert Conner Independent Living Center
Healthy Henry County Communities
Henry County Extension
Henry County Schools
Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services
Iowa Wesleyan College
Iowa Workforce Development
Southeast Iowa Community College
Parents & Youth

The successful operation of this project required the cooperation and collaboration of several organizations and individuals. Partner organizations included: Area Education Agency; Department of Human Services; Evert Conner Independent Living Center; Healthy Henry County Communities; Henry County Extension; Henry County School Districts: Mt. Pleasant, New London, WACO, Winfield-Mt. Union; Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services; Iowa Wesleyan College; Iowa Workforce Development, Workforce Investment Act and Disability Program Navigator; Southeast Iowa Community College; Parents and Youth.

Demographics

Henry County is one of the 99 counties in the state. Located in Southeast Iowa, there are four school districts serving the youth in the county; Winfield/Mt. Union, WACO, New London, and Mount Pleasant. There are approximately 3,662 youth, kindergarten through twelfth grade, attending these school districts. Approximately 472 of the youth identified as having a disability and receiving special education services.

Data from 2000 indicate that the county population is approximately 20,000 with Mount Pleasant being the largest town with 8,751 residents, New London has 1,937 residents, Winfield has about 600 fewer residents with 1,131 and Wayland is the smallest town with 945 citizens. Year 2000 data also indicate that the county is made up of largely White-Non-Hispanic individuals ranging from 89% to over 98% in the towns. Other races represented include Black, Hispanic, Asian and two or more races. Although it appears fairly homogenous, there were 14 different languages spoken in the Mount Pleasant School District during the 2006-2007 school year.

Governance Group

Iowa Department
for the Blind

Iowa Department
of Education

Iowa Department
of Human Services

Iowa Division
of Persons with
Disabilities

Iowa Vocational
Rehabilitation
Services

Iowa Governor's
Developmental
Disabilities Council

Iowa Workforce
Development

Strengths

A major strength of Henry County is the people. Although all counties could make that statement, Henry County is truly concerned about all its citizens and formed Healthy Henry County Communities (HHCC), a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization to address community issues. Formed in the 1980's, HHCC is staffed by a full time director with a volunteer board of directors and a wide network of paid staff and volunteers who coordinate Diversity, Healthy Youth and Families, Community Wellness, and Senior Services action teams. HHCC is a public/private partnership where a number of government agencies, local organizations, and interested citizens come together to identify emerging issues, coordinate existing programs, and design and implement new initiatives. It functions as a combination inter-agency council, community forum, and social action organization.

While a structure like this might not be necessary for replication, some type of interagency group already working on programs or services or identifying needs of the community would be helpful. It gave us a base from which to start.

Preparation

To change a system, it is necessary to first understand how the individuals who use it perceive it. Therefore, one of the first things we did was to conduct focus groups and individual interviews with:

- Youth with disabilities enrolled in traditional high schools
- Youth with disabilities enrolled in alternative high schools
- Youth with disabilities graduated from traditional high schools
- Youth with disabilities graduated from alternative high schools
- Youth with disabilities who had dropped out of school
- Parents of youth with disabilities

Problem

We had been told that the primary problem facing Henry County youth with disabilities of transition age was that they tended to leave school with no solid plan or information regarding life after high school. It was described as, "kids leave school, hang around for a few years, get in trouble, and then seek assistance." So by the time they entered the Vocational Rehabilitation system the employment barriers they had when they left school were multiplied by additional barriers they acquired "hanging around" for two or three years.

We decided to investigate this by conducting focus groups and interviews. It soon became apparent that youth, parents, and educators did not know much about the adult service providers. Likewise, the adult service providers did not know much about school services.

From focus groups we learned that the youth knew about only the adult services they or their friends had used and that parents know about only those services that teachers or other parents shared with them. It was clear that even if the youth or parents had heard about a particular adult service, they did not understand the eligibility requirements or procedure for securing that service. This was also true for teachers and support staff.

Just as educators, parents, and youth did not understand adult services, adult services did not understand the schools. They were somewhat familiar with IEP's (Individual Education Plans) and the staffings associated with them, but they did not understand how the schools operated. Thus they were not meaningful transition planning partners.

Seeking input from all of the partners plus local businesses, we convened a Stakeholders meeting to share the focus group results. (Henry County Transition Partners: Discovery of Key Barriers to Effective Transition for Henry County Youth with Disabilities) We wanted to share the information in a non-threatening manner so a neutral facilitator was used. The basic premise was “This is what we found. What should we do about it?”

This meeting was critical. At this meeting we gathered support from teachers, AEA personnel, and adult service providers – all of whom must be involved for effective transition services. It became evident that the lack of communication between school and adult service personnel was a large part of the issue. Additionally, school personnel lacked quality transition planning knowledge and didn’t know how or when to include adult service providers.

It was also clear that the different agencies, although all involved with youth, had their own priorities and agendas. While they said that they wanted to work together, little had been done toward making this a reality.

In summary, the problem of youth leaving school without a transition plan was based on several factors:

- Communication: Lack of, especially between school and adult service personnel
- Information: Lack of or poor timing
- Systems: Confusing and difficult to understand
- Priorities: Different among all involved
- Confused collaboration: talking about it but doing little of it

Solution

In general, our solutions came from the Stakeholders meeting. It became clear that opportunities to learn about, as well as from, each other and access to transition planning information would be essential. We identified five strategies

- Establish regular meetings to share information
- Form a parent support group to provide information and support
- Develop a transition planning “Cookbook” or “Guide”
- Implement a team approach to transition issues
- Develop a transition resource directory for parents and youth

Implementation

Transition Partners activities were determined by the team and most of the time coordinated by SueAnn Morrow, hired with grant funds for this specific reason. Core team members consistently stepped up to assist with various activities although many were specifically assigned to SueAnn.

Throughout implementation team members discussed how they would sustain their work without grant funds. Over time solutions were identified. Various partners stepped up to sustain the critical accomplishments that matched their mission or most affected their bottom line.

Stakeholder Meetings

We established regularly held meetings of the individuals and agencies involved in the transition process. These meetings provided the opportunity to share information, develop relationships, and make referrals. Meeting agendas typically included a formal presentation and provided time for networking.

As previously noted, at the first Stakeholder meeting we discussed the information gathered from Focus Groups and Interviews. The next year, we held two Stakeholder meetings. Agenda items for both of these meetings included sharing information regarding state-of-art transition services, reviewing drafts of the Transition Cookbook, and learning about services and programs from each other. The third year we scheduled three Stakeholder meetings. The first was shortly after school started. It served as a type of “Welcome Back: Here’s What Happened Over the Summer” meeting. Four months later we held another Stakeholder meeting. At this meeting an expert on IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) highlighted the new 2004 regulations specific to transition.

Parent Support Group:

Based on the belief that educated parents make better educational partners, a Henry County Parent Support group was formed. Our goal was to provide information that would help them become an equal partner in education and transition planning for their child. Parents of any Henry County child receiving special education services were invited to attend. We felt it was important to include all parents, not just those with transition age youth.

With the exception of December, the group met monthly during the school year; they did not meet during the summer. Attendance ranged from a few to over 30 and appeared to be impacted by the topic. It appeared that if a parent felt that the information to be presented would be valuable to them or their child, they attended. Conversely, if they felt it wasn’t applicable, they didn’t attend.

Meetings were advertised via the local newspaper, local radio station, and direct mail. The group also campaigned for attendees to “Come Back and Bring Two with You” to the next meeting. It is unclear which method was the most effective in reaching parents.

A core group of parents generated meeting topics and potential speakers. SueAnn secured the speakers as directed, reserved the meeting site, developed brochures, stuffed envelopes, and coordinated the meetings. The Area Education Agency mailed promotional fliers to families of children in special education and provided pizza for the meetings.

“Cookbook” Guide:

Our Transition Partners Coordinator took the lead in developing this Transition Guide for teachers and parents. The guide outlines activities and services, from 8th to 12th grade, that are important to making a successful transition from school to post secondary environments. To identify the specific activities and services, meetings were held with representatives from the schools, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), and the various providers of adult services. Once the activities and services were identified, they were put into a year-by-year flowchart, providing a quick overview. Subsequent pages provided additional details and information for accessing the activities and services.

Teachers and adult services personnel reviewed drafts of the guide at two, separate Stakeholder meetings. The guide was “tested” at a school district meeting for teachers and para-educators. Attendees used the guide to define effective transition practices that youth with disabilities in their school should experience. The guidebook was printed and disseminated to teachers, adult service providers, and parents.

Transition Resource Team Meetings:

To ensure that youth did not fall through the cracks upon graduation, a meeting was held during the school year with Transition Partners team members that included representatives from the school, Area Education

Agency, IVRS personnel, and occasionally staff from the local community college. The intent of the meeting was to brainstorm ideas to help meet the needs of the graduating youth and to determine potential “system” barriers.

Basically, the teacher reported what the youth wanted to do and highlighted the services he or she thought the youth might need. The other members asked questions and made suggestions. Often assignments with timelines resulted from the meetings. For example, perhaps the youth had expressed an interest in using IVRS services, the assignment would be for the IVRS Counselor to make sure all the necessary paper work had been filed. Or perhaps the Transition Partners Coordinator was to contact the local utility company and ask about summer internships. She would then share whatever information she gathered with the teacher who in turn would give it to the youth so they could investigate the possibility of securing a summer job with the company.

In general these meetings lasted about an hour and on the average 5-6 youth were discussed. Neither the parents nor the youth attended. No decisions were made. The team members tossed around ideas and handed out follow-up assignments. In the beginning discussion around these meetings included concerns that the brainstorming truly represent the interests of the youth and that the group respect the “nothing about me without me” philosophy. The meetings did not circumvent self-determination or person-centered planning; the meetings kept the partners up to date on available services and supports. They in turn shared the identified resources with the youth, family, and others involved in transition planning.

For example, one young man wanted to go to the local community college. He had received counseling services for several years and the school personnel who knew him well recommended that counseling continue after graduation as well as once he started his post-secondary career. Because of this meeting, that service was set in place “before” the young man graduated. An added bonus of this pro-active approach was that his current counselor introduced him to his new counselor. The team brainstormed that such a “hand-off” would facilitate quality service delivery for this youth.

Multi-County Resource Directory:

Team members believed a directory specific to disability services would help families and youth access services. Data indicated that local families of children with disabilities tended to move frequently, though not far, often moving to a neighboring county. Therefore, the directory needed to include resources available in Henry, Lee, Louisa, and Des Moines Counties.

Iowa Wesleyan College team member, Dr. Heather Brister, took the lead in developing the directory. As a professor in education, Dr. Brister taught a Transition and Career class. She made the directory a class assignment. This served two important purposes. First, it put information on services available to individuals with disabilities or their families in one document. Second future teachers and teachers working on a special education endorsement, earned credit for research that helped them assist youth and their families in developing effective transition plans.

Data

As with any prototype, discussions regarding data collection were held. These discussions focused on such issues as determining what data was important to collect, possible to collect, and the best methods of collecting the data. The Advisory Board decided to focus on:

- Work skills development

- Connection with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services

- Parent knowledge of and access to information about special education

Work skills development:

Transition Partners worked with the Mount Pleasant Area Human Resource Association to adapt a Work Experience Evaluation for use by youth and employers. Areas rated include attendance and punctuality; appearance; accepting direction and constructive criticism; motivation and taking initiative; workplace culture, rules and safety; communication skills in speaking, listening, and interacting with co-workers. Youth and employers rate performance in each area from zero, failure to meet to 6, exceeds expectations. They can also add comments for each area.

Connection with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services:

Initial data collection efforts with the Henry County School Districts indicate that more youth are completing high school with open IVRS cases than prior to Transition Partners.

- New London:
2003: 6 graduating seniors; one referred to IVRS, but not eligible; 5 not connected
2007: 4 graduating seniors; 4 current IVRS clients
- Mount Pleasant:
2003: 16 graduating seniors; 5 connected with IVRS
2007: 26 graduating seniors; 18 connected to IVRS

(the 8 not connected to IVRS were all contacted multiple times; they were either not interested, didn't return paper work, or were pursuing mission work)

- Wisdom Quest: (alternative school in Mount Pleasant)
2003: 5 graduating seniors; none connected to IVRS
2007: 1 graduating senior; referred but not interested, planning to join the Navy
- WACO:
2003: 2 graduating seniors; none connected to IVRS
2007: 4 graduating seniors; 4 current IVRS clients
- Winfield-Mt. Union:
2003: 7 graduating seniors; none connected to IVRS
2007: 4 graduating seniors; one connected to IVRS; outreach to other 3 continues

Parent knowledge of and access to information about special education:

Parents reported that the Parent Support Group was very helpful. One parent said, "The Support Group was awesome for me." Parents indicated that the opportunity to gather information from people they knew and trusted was refreshing. Feedback indicated that prior to establishment of the Parent Support Group parents often felt overwhelmed, especially in regard to transition planning. One parent stated:

Before the parent support group I felt alone in my struggles with having a daughter with a disability. After I joined the group in January 2006 I found support from both the parents and the coordinator. Because of the parent support group I have gained resource information where I can obtain additional help and I learned of opportunities available for my daughter. I've gained support from other parents who struggle with similar issues. Because of the parent support group I know I am not alone.

--Ann S., a parent, June 2007

From the first Parent Support Group meeting in January 2006 through May 2007, the group met 13 times. Attendance ranged from a low of 3 to a high of 30. An unduplicated estimate of the number of parents and others receiving information through the meetings is 35. Given the population of our rural area, we consider attendance at the Parent Support Group meetings substantial. Topics included:

Communication Skills
Friendships and Inclusion Opportunities
Individual Education Plans
IDEIA 2004
People who often attend IEP meetings
Alternate Assessments and Assistive Technology
Extended School Year Services
Speech and Language Services
Transition Services
AEA merger and the opportunity to meet the new AEA Special Education Director

Additional feedback:

Anecdotal statements were collected about other aspects of the Prototype. The teachers considered the Transition Resource Team meetings to be very valuable. One participating teacher described them as “phenomenal.” Other teachers echoed her sentiment stating that “these meetings were extremely valuable and worth every minute.” Both parents and teachers felt the multi-county directory was very helpful. One teacher was excited to “finally be able to help her students and parents find what they need.” Many teachers handed them out during the student’s final IEP meeting.

Bonus

A major bonus connected with Transition Partners is the relationships that developed. Staff from the schools, AEA, and service organizations came together in several venues, sharing information and forging relationships. As a result, phone calls were much easier to make and new friendships developed. It is easier to work with a friend than a professional acquaintance.

Sustainability

Sustainability was a critical and on-going question for Transition Partners. As we orchestrated activities and developed products, the always present question was “Is this something that we want to see continue?” By the end of the second year we were convinced that these major prototype activities and products were important and should be maintained:

Stakeholder Meetings
Parent Support Group
Transition Guide/Cookbook
Transition Resource Team Meetings
Multi-County Resource Directory

Stakeholder Meetings:

During the 2007-2008 school year a Stakeholder meeting will be planned for each semester. The prototype will assist with initial planning; Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the Evert Conner Independent Living Center have pledged to continue this effort. The Henry County Extension office will provide meeting space. Efforts are currently underway to work with the new Great Prairie AEA Director of Special Education to determine their commitment to Stakeholder Meetings. Topics for the meetings will be developed with feedback from these partners as well as teachers and school administrators, keeping in mind recent state activity regarding quality transition services.

Parent Support Group:

The AEA has pledged its support to continue the Parent Support Group. Additionally the Henry County Extension office has offered meeting space and the Evert Conner Independent Living Center has offered to help with the coordination. It is planned that the same schedule that occurred during Year Three will continue: meetings will be held in September, October, November, January, February, March, April and May. The AEA will assist with the mailings and food. Evert Conner personnel will assist with coordination such as securing speakers. School districts personnel have also indicated their willingness to assist as needed.

Transition Guide/Cookbook:

The Evert Conner Independent Living Center volunteered to absorb the printing costs. School personnel, adult agency personnel, and IVRS staff will revise the guide/cookbook as needed. More important than publishing and periodically revising the guide/cookbook is actual use. The guide/cookbook can be “individualized” for each school with specifics on transition services and how they will ensure that best practice fits into their existing school culture. As one school administrator said, “This will change the way we do business.”

Transition Resource Team Meetings:

Numerous agencies and staff members expressed the need to continue Transition Resource Team meetings. IVRS will coordinate these valuable meetings; team partners also want to engage the AEA Special Education Director in this effort.

Multi-County Resource Directory:

The partner most instrumental in development of the directory, Iowa Wesleyan College, volunteered to continue updating the directory. AEA and the Evert Conner Independent Living Center volunteered to be responsible for printing the directories.

Lessons Learned

Confused collaboration:

There is a difference between talking about collaboration and actually making it happen. Transition Partners learned that “sitting around a table talking about working together is not collaborating and does not effect a systemic change” and they termed actions such as this “confused collaboration.”

Stakeholders meeting:

It was noted that presenting information in a “non-blaming, non confrontational” manner at the first Stakeholder meeting was critical and that having a skilled facilitator who could move the group toward solution consensus was paramount. The general direction and specific activities for Transition Partners team members came from the Stakeholder meetings. Community ownership generated through activities such as these Stakeholders meetings is vital to sustainability of critical accomplishments.

Importance of partnership:

It is necessary to “Go Deep.” People leave and positions change. It is important to have multi-level contacts and commitment from each team member. It is also critical to “Keep At It.” While all Transition Partners members provided services to youth with disabilities, it was necessary to periodically **remember that by working together we can accomplish more, and that a success, is a shared success.**