



## **Workforce and Personal Development**

### ***Challenges of Job Readiness and Transition from School to Work***

***(Focus on youth with cognitive disabilities)***

*By Christine Casey, Ed.D, Co-Founder of Social Simentor®*

#### **Introduction**

Simentor simulations offer an important answer for those districts, parents and agencies with limited resources. It provides a way to individualize instruction, provide practice in role playing social skills allowing valuable staff time and energy to be spent in other important educational tasks. The computer access offers an additional benefit of practicing 21st Century Skills that will be needed on almost every job in the future. Here is a brief look at the recent workforce development efforts and Special Education federal requirements in transition planning and programming. The sad statistics show that students who do not demonstrate these soft skills will have a much more difficult time obtaining and retaining employment. Those with behavioral issues will face an even steeper challenge to leave government subsidy and find success in the world of work.

#### **Efforts in Effective Transition for Youth**

In 2007, a National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) was created to coordinate national resources, offer technical assistance and disseminate information regarding transition for youth with disabilities specifically to move them smoothly into adulthood and well prepared to have a successful future. NCSET was instrumental in creating The National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASET). NASET is a national voluntary coalition of 40 organizations involved in the transition of youth and includes 40 organizations and advocacy groups that represent special education, general education, career and technical education, youth development, multicultural perspectives, and parents.

These national organizing efforts are a testament to the issues of complexity that the system currently faces. There are many examples of best practice around the country. Excellent examples of governmental efforts at addressing the issue of youth transition, especially youth with disabilities, exist, but there is no comprehensive approach that ensures that all youth have an opportunity for a smooth and effective transition to adulthood nationwide. A successful transition to adult life for a young person with a disability is dependent on the collaborative partnership that includes youth and families, schools, businesses and employers and multiple agencies at the community, state, and national levels. Complicating the process in achieving successful youth transition is the

challenge of disability characteristics (e.g., emotional disturbance, sensory and developmental disabilities, Autism spectrum disorders) and the impact of poverty, race and ethnicity, as well as limited English proficiency.

### **IDEA 2004 Focused on Transition**

To address the deficiencies for youth with disabilities, the reauthorized IDEA 2004 added stronger language to the transition service requirements of the Individual Education Plan for Individuals with Disabilities. Transition services are defined as “a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that:

- (A) is designed to be a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;
- (B) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests . . . " IDEA Sec. 300.29

Thus, the IEP team must address the student's need for instruction that will assist the student in preparing for transition beginning at age 14. At age 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team), the IEP must contain a statement of needed transition services for the student. This should include a statement of inter-agency responsibilities, if appropriate. This coordinated set of activities must come with measurable outcomes that will transition the student from school to post-school activities.

Each school district implements this mandate in a somewhat different manner according to their fiscal and human resources and the knowledge their leadership and staff have of their state laws, regulations, requirements and resources. They also need to map and understand the local agencies that can work with the schools, students and families to make these transition activities happen.

NCSET and NASET recognized the need for national standards to create consistency and technical assistance to help create more uniform systems that blend and braid the resources to help families and school districts create effective individual plans.

### **The Social Security Administration Attempted to Find Answers**

Extensive and comprehensive research was initiated by the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) when they provided funding to develop and rigorously evaluate promising strategies to help youth with disabilities become as economically self-sufficient as possible as they transition from school to work when they created the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD). ([http://www.mdrc.org/project\\_20\\_79.html](http://www.mdrc.org/project_20_79.html))

YTD projects were funded in September 2003 in seven sites: New York ( 2 sites) and one each in California, Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, and Mississippi. Three additional sites were identified in Florida, Maryland, and West Virginia. All these projects vary in the types of

youth served and the services provided, but common themes include partnerships with several local organizations and services that include counseling, service coordination, and family support.

The motivation to evaluate the impact of these programs on the successful transition to work comes from the huge investment made in Supplemental Security Benefits. “In April 2005, approximately 776,000 youth with disabilities ages 14 to 25 were receiving federal Supplemental Security Benefits, and the expected lifetime stay on the disability rolls for those who began receiving SSI under age 18 was a total of 27 years. Programs that can help youth make a successful transition from school to work, and to economic self-sufficiency, hold great promise — for youth with disabilities and for the federal government, which stands to reap significant savings in the long-term costs of benefits.”

([http://www.mdrc.org/project\\_20\\_79.html](http://www.mdrc.org/project_20_79.html))

### **Sunset of School To Work Efforts Left A Void**

The variety of disabling conditions creates a need for customized and individualized training. The sunset of the federal School-to-Work program on June 30, 2002, left a void that states and school districts needed to fill without these federal resources. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, Public Law 103-239, 108 Stat 568, provided funding for states through five-year grants to implement the recommendation of the SCANS commission, including the soft skills necessary to be successful in the workplace. State responses to the loss of this funding varied.

An example of a pro-active approach happened in Connecticut. Connecticut published a report for the legislature in order to recommend the establishment of a next generation of workforce readiness activities based on 21st century skills to take the place of the School to Work initiatives. This 2002 report

([http://ctcareerchoices.org/resource/docs/federal\\_stc\\_experience.pdf](http://ctcareerchoices.org/resource/docs/federal_stc_experience.pdf)) led to the development of Connecticut Career Choices, a best practice, statewide pilot of curriculum, internships, mentoring and career exploration that included soft skills training and application through planned real world experiences.

“Based on the review of the literature and interviews, it is clear that several important concepts have emerged out of the School-to-Career program nationally, as well as in the state, that have strong validity and should be incorporated into a future model for Connecticut. These concepts include:

### **Nationally Recognized Skill Standards**

- Curriculum base for all course work
- Project- and activity-based learning
- Emphasis on teamwork
- Self-direction
- Continuous learning (life-long)
- Technology course work

([http://ctcareerchoices.org/resource/docs/federal\\_stc\\_experience.pdf](http://ctcareerchoices.org/resource/docs/federal_stc_experience.pdf)) Connecticut Career Choices: The Federal School to Career Experience in CT and Recommendations for the Future, Office for Work Force Competitiveness, Feb 2002, p 7.

### **Collaboration Among Agencies**

Another best practice example of a state wide collaborative initiative can be seen in Vermont. The VocRehabVermont School Transition Program offers a collaborative multi-agency approach that places Transition counselors in all districts working with all Vermont high schools and a variety of technical centers, and alternative or independent schools. This project is specifically aimed at youth with behavioral difficulties. Vocational Counselors have a dedicated caseload of transition-aged youth (between the ages of 14 and 23). Their goal is to improve employment and post secondary outcomes for these youth. They meet with students in their local high schools, sometimes as early as freshman year, focusing on both short and long term individual goals. These counselors also provide consultation to the schools engendering an understanding of the available information and resources and by collaboration with inter-agency partners. The counselors are catalysts for change to improve the transition process for youth. The Department of Corrections, Department of Health/Division of Mental Health, and the Department for Children and Family Services has created The Vermont JOBS program, led by VocRehabVermont , in order to serve youth with serious emotional behavioral disabilities (EBD).

### **Youth with Behavioral Disorders Have a Difficult Road Ahead**

Research shows that youth with behavioral disabilities have the highest dropout rate from secondary school among all disability groups. They also experience the poorest outcomes in employment, post-secondary education, independent living, and incarceration of any of the disability groups. Another best practice example of a curricular solution comes from University of South Florida where they are piloting personnel training modules to help educators and job coaches assist youth in making the connection between their behavior and consequences. This program “Training Modules for Personnel Serving Transition-Aged Youth and Young Adults” is currently piloted as an on-line module. It is also available as a competency-based personnel training workshop through faculty and staff from the Transition to Independence Program Team at the National Center on Youth Transition (NCYT). This organization is housed within the Department of Child and Family Studies at USF’s Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health (FMHI). The series is designed for teachers, mental health specialists, transition facilitators, employment specialists, guidance counselors, resource coordinators, parents, foster parents, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and juvenile justice personnel. Using this program youth with behavioral difficulties will learn to solve problems using the following modules:

- Strength Discovery Assessment Process
- Developing and Using Rationales
- Social Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Processes

Several recent reports such as 21st Century Skills for 21st Century Learners identified teamwork, collaboration, interpersonal skills, personal, social and civic responsibility, as

well as self direction and problem solving as skills critical to workplace success in a technological age. The best practices for teaching these kinds of applied skills must be modified according to the various disabilities and cognitive levels of the learners. It would be important to ensure that these skills are taught in relevant ways to all youth, including those with sensory impairments, those with learning disabilities, those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), as well as those who are emotionally, behaviorally and learning disabled.

### **Social Skills Instruction Typical in Programs Serving Lower Functioning Students**

Programs to teach social skills have existed historically in programs for students with lower cognitive functioning levels. A best practice example used nationally is the CIRCLES curriculum, co-created by Leslie Walker-Hirsch, MED and Marklyn P. Champagne, RN <http://www.stanfield.com/sexed.html> , This video and classroom based program to teach social boundaries and mutual interactions has been implemented in many facilities, such as special education classes in high schools, those in special education schools and those in vocational preparation programs with students with cognitive disabilities. It is used in almost equal numbers by student with mental health issues as well and those with intellectual disabilities. It includes some universal design elements and encompasses many students with sensory disabilities and physical disabilities. Unfortunately, it requires that the teacher be trained and lead the sessions. It is not self directed.

Social skills instruction is not required and not provided routinely. Further, the push for academics that NCLB brought has eliminated all but academics in many programs for struggling learners. The first thing to be eliminated in the school day are non-academic courses that are viewed as extraneous by those who are not fully aware of the impact that soft skills learning has on the future success in the workplace of its students, especially those with mental health, intellectual, sensory, motoric disabilities. For surely, if they realized they would know that best practice must include training to better manage all aspects of adult life In the work environment, business leaders have repeatedly reported that those with intellectual disabilities lose their jobs or do not even get considered for jobs NOT because they cannot perform the job tasks, but because of their poor work ethic, poor communication skills with supervisors and peer, lack of self direction and poor teamwork.

### **Social Skills Instruction Should Be Available Across Disability Groups**

Best practice should assist transition students to improve their abilities in these areas of learning as well as the others that have been listed above. The current state of workforce development and transition issues inspired the designers of Simentor simulations to create an economical e-learning simulation solution that could reach literally thousands of students on their individual level and provide for them the training and practice they need to understand the social interactions during the interview process and how to use those skills once they are on the job.