A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families

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Editors' Note: The following is the complete testimony provided by Dr. Paul Wehman to the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education Transition Task Force Meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, on April 18, 2002.

Thank you for the privilege of presenting my recommendations on transition research for youth with disabilities. My interest in this issue is not only professional but also personal. My daughter Cara is currently in high school and has already been through five open-heart surgeries. She has also been diagnosed with a learning disability. Peyton, my stepson, has ADHD. As a result, I have been a regular consumer of special education services. I am extremely active in IEP [Individualized Education Program] development, standardized testing issues, and transition planning for each of my children. I also approach this testimony with a professional expertise and investment. I currently serve as the director of an NIDRR-funded rehabilitation research and training center on workplace supports, and my experience as a special education professional spans 30 years.

As you know, the unfortunate fact remains that youth with disabilities are considerably more often unemployed or underemployed relative to their nondisabled peers (National Organization on Disability, 2000; Trupin, Sebesta, Yelin, & LaPlante, 1997; Zemsky & Odel, 1994). They also have higher school dropout rates (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Office of Special Education Programs, 1996), and smaller numbers of these children actually graduate and go on to receive a college education (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001; Hurst & Smerdon, 2000; Stodden, 2001). These facts suggest a strong need for the evidence-based practice of transition-related activities that are particularly relevant to vocational competence, career preparation, and competitive employment.

Recommendations for Employment and Career Building

I would like to begin by addressing two major categories vital to transition: competitive employment outcomes and post-secondary education. Although substantial progress has been made in these areas since the inception of P.L. 94-142 [Education for All Handicapped Children in 1975, much work remains. There are three key issues in the area of employment and career building that I strongly urge the Commission to consider.

1. Competitive employment history is one of the most powerful Contra-indicators for youth ultimately depending on SSI [Supplemental Security Income] long-term benefits. Therefore, students need to attain competitive employment before leaving school. This can best be accomplished via partnerships between school personnel and staff from the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program, as well as other community agencies. Moreover, language that is more persuasive should be instituted to strengthen IDEA, thereby encouraging LEAs' responsibility for the provision of employment and career-building services. In addition, there should be a grant authority in IDEA requiring states to earmark dollars specifically for funding LEA competitive employment initiatives, including supported employment.

2. One-Stop Career Centers supported through the Workforce Investment Act (P.L. 105-220) need to be restructured to accommodate students with all types of disabilities. Although recent efforts that

have somewhat improved overall accessibility should be commended, problems remain that restrict access and prevent overall coordination of services. Federal and state policies should be amended to require inclusion of students while they are still in special education. This should begin at age 16-and when appropriate, by age 14. An expansion to address these shortcomings of WIA [Workforce Investment Act] would require (a) making all services accessible to a younger population, such as individuals ages 16 to 21, and (b) opening up One-Stop training assistance under some parameter to students still in school.

3. Congress and the Administration should work to ensure that federal monies appropriated through the Workforce Investment Act, Titles XIX and XX of the Social Security Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the IDEA are used to support competitive employment and career development alternatives for students. For example,

" Federal and state agencies should expand the use of mechanisms that encourage joint funding of career development and work experience that begins early in the educational process for youth with disabilities. Illustrations include

a) local school districts and developmental disabilities agencies jointly funding job placement and ongoing support services for students with significant disabilities who may already be receiving SSI benefits, and

b) local school districts and vocational rehabilitation offices jointly funding the development of apprenticeship and mentor programs or corporate partnership initiatives.

" In general, vocational rehabilitation programs need to be funded in a manner allowing these agencies to participate earlier and more completely in the transition process. Many, if not most, state VR agencies follow the unsatisfactory policy of withholding rehabilitation placement services until students are within 6 months of their high school graduation.

Specific research needs in this area are included in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Research on Employment Outcomes

- Longitudinal research is needed on the benefits experienced by students who have had real work experiences before graduation versus those who have not.
- Research needs to be conducted on how to include youth with disabilities in One-Stop Career Centers as well as how One-Stop Career Centers can work most effectively with youth with disabilities.
- Research is needed on how businesses and schools can work together most effectively to facilitate employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.
- Research needs to be conducted to determine the effects of participation in the SSA Ticket to Work program for students ages 14 to 18, as well as on the effects of SSI redetermination.

Recommendations for Postsecondary Education

There is also a need to address the challenges associated with postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities. Today, all parents are aware that in an increasingly competitive workforce, their children will need higher levels of education and training, and most parents aspire for their children to go on to achieve some form of higher education, regardless of disability. Parents of children with disabilities have a number of concerns specific to this issue.

It has been empirically established that there are positive relationships among disability, level of education, and adult employment (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997). On a positive note, the representation of students with disabilities in higher education has risen to about 20%, a dramatic increase since 1978 (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gajar, 1998; Henderson, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Nevertheless, the enrollment rates of students with disabilities are still 50% lower than enrollment among the general population (Stodden, 2001; Wittenburg & Maag, in press). Even when students are enrolled in post-secondary education, challenges remain. Students with disabilities often have trouble completing selected programs of study (Getzel et al., 2001; National Organization on Disability, 1998), and even if they are successful in earning a college degree, postgraduation employment is far from guaranteed. Disturbingly, on average it takes students with disabilities approximately 5 years after college to obtain a position in their chosen careers (Bursuck & Rose, 1992).

The following three recommendations for increasing the odds of students gaining access to college, graduating, and ultimately finding employment require serious consideration:

1. There is a critical need for professional development and training for faculty and administrators to ensure a quality postsecondary education for students with disabilities. These activities should focus on incorporating universal design techniques into course work, using technology to enhance learning, and providing accessible distance education courses for individuals with disabilities. The use of universal design, particularly, has wide-ranging positive implications for teaching all students with special learning needs. To encourage the continued development and implementation of innovative techniques and strategies, it is recommended that funding of demonstration projects designed to ensure a quality education for students with disabilities continue through the Higher Education Act.

2. Provision of financial incentives for public and private colleges that enroll, support, and graduate students with disabilities is another highly effective strategy that could be accomplished by amendment of the Higher Education Act. Additionally, issues such as (a) flexible admissions policies, (b) eligibility for receiving services, (c) substantial expansion of the use of assistive technology, and (d) benefits counseling for youth with disabilities needs to be examined. The Higher Education Act, NIDRR, and IDEA should earmark research, demonstration, and training funds to study these issues in 4-year college settings. Expanding the number of OPE [Office of Postsecondary Education] model demonstration projects and making postsecondary education a priority within the IDEA, Part D, Model Demonstration for Children Projects would be a positive first step in addressing these topics.

3. Comprehensive career-planning strategies are needed at the postsecondary level to address the difficulties still faced by students with disabilities as they prepare for future employment. Students with disabilities are often unable to articulate how their academic accommodations transfer to the workplace. They are unclear about how their disability impacts their performance on the job, and they are often enrolled in a program of study that does not lead to their chosen careers. Additionally, many students with disabilities lack needed work experience to build a resume of success prior to graduating from college. Strategies and techniques allowing students with disabilities to receive comprehensive career services through resources offered on college campuses are imperative. Yet, university career staff have expressed a need for more information about individuals with disabilities, how to advise students regarding disclosure, what accommodations employers are expected to make, and how accommodations actually work on the job site.

As Wittenburg and Maag (in press) noted, there is a serious deficiency of quality research data in the area of post-secondary education. Many persons in higher education disability service positions have also highlighted an apparent fundamental disconnection between IDEA, ADA, and the Higher Education Act, especially in terms of disability documentation and program coordination. These

areas need to be addressed, particularly as they are extremely confusing to students, parents, and guidance counselors. Specific postsecondary research areas are described in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Research on Postsecondary Education

- Research is needed on the differential effects on college admission rates, as well as on employment outcomes, for students with disabilities who have used accommodations in high school versus those who have not.
- The effectiveness of strategies and academic support techniques on student access, per-formance, and retention in higher education must be investigated.
- There is currently no research on which models of service delivery most effectively encour-age self-identification of a disability and use of the accommodations provided.
- The specific impact of comprehensive career planning services and their ultimate effect on the long-term employment of students within their chosen careers should also be examined.
- The barriers to, and supports for, succeeding in postsecondary environments, as perceived by students with disabilities, must be identified, and research is needed on the strategies or accommodations that students themselves believe to be most effective in overcoming those barriers.

Conclusions

The U.S. taxpayer has invested billions of dollars in special education for the youth of America in the past quarter century (Wehman, 2001). The taxpayer expects schools and the federal government to be cost effective and accountable for positive long-term results and outcomes associated with this investment. Tremendous strides have been made in this area. However, in order to uphold the covenant made to parents, students, and school districts, we must provide students with the best possible opportunity to work and go to college. Full implementation of IDEA cannot be achieved without honoring this covenant.

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