Getting Families Involved in the Transition Process
by Cathy Haarstad 2003

Family involvement in transition begins with establishing effective family/school partnerships that continue through middle and secondary grade levels. Family involvement builds on traditional strategies for involving families and leads to exemplary practices in transition planning.

What Does Research Tell Us About Family Involvement?

Research shows that family/school partnerships have a positive impact on student achievement. A successful transition for students with disabilities is equal in importance to academic or functional achievement. Effective partnerships with families have a positive impact on transition.

Research about partnerships and their impact on transition indicates that weak partnerships may not sustain family involvement in the transition process. Partnerships tend to decline across the grades, unless schools and teachers work to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership at each grade level (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). Partnerships which are informal and welcoming as students begin school, become formalized and less welcoming by high school (Pianta, 2002). Contacts involving formal meetings and print/web information about school rules and graduation requirements rather than informal face-to-face meetings that build trust and foster communication may be common at the secondary level and less effective.

Research conducted through the Harvard Family Research Project indicates that communities experience unique challenges in building positive relationships. Affluent communities currently have more positive family involvement, on average, unless schools and teachers in economically distressed communities work to build positive partnerships with their students’ families. Schools within more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having, unless they work at developing balanced partnership programs that include contacts about positive accomplishments of students (Epstein, 2001). Single parents, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school, and fathers are less involved, on average, at the school building, unless the school organizes opportunities for families to volunteer at various times and in various places to support the school and their children (Epstein, 2001).

When families are not involved, educators may hastily conclude that families are not interested or have other priorities. Research indicates the opposite is true. Just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities so as to remain good partners in their children’s education (Epstein, 97).

Just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive programs and are consequently
fearful about trying. This creates a “rhetoric rut” in which educators are stuck, expressing support for partnerships without taking any action.

Just about all students at all levels – elementary, middle, and high school – want their families to be more knowledgeable partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in assisting communications between home and school (Epstein, 1995, p. 703).

**What Does Family Involvement Accomplish?**

Both families and schools have basic responsibilities in raising and educating children. There are several areas of overlap that can bring families and schools together within the transition process and help to forge positive relationships.

Data from the National Transition Longitudinal Study describes the role of families in transition:

**Parents and Families....**

- Transmit culture and family values
- Provide continuity between school, home, and adults services
- Greatly influence future career aspiration and attitudes
- Play keys role in connecting students to resources

**Parental Roles**

- Encourage self determination and goal setting
- Help teach daily living skills at home
- Help students develop personal and social values
- Participate in planning meeting, expressing concerns and ideas
- Work with outside professionals to plan financial, legal and residential alternatives
- Explore and promote community resources

**Parents....**

- Provide in depth knowledge about the student
- Support participation in school activities
- Reinforce skills in non-school environments
- Follow through with transition plan
- Are the only constant through students and changes
- Have an intense commitment to their child's success

Given the important role that families play, establishing positive relationships and supporting family involvement in the transition process is vital to assuring an effective transition from high school to adult life. How is this accomplished when high schools are focused on many competing agendas (e.g. No Child Left Behind, alternate assessment) and challenged to give students the primary role in the decision making process. To answer this questions, let’s look at what students themselves have to say.
In research conducted by the Beach Center on Families and Disability at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, students said families were their best source of future planning and spoke about how families can make transition easier. Besides generally caring about and supporting them, families can:

- Help students stay in school and graduate;
- Follow through in seeing that students do class work/homework;
- Guide students to make right choices and plan;
- Offer ideas;
- Teach students how to use a checkbook;
- Access and influence professional assistance by attending IEP meetings;
- Follow-up on IEP meetings to make sure the plan is implemented;
- Get advanced schooling/pay for college;
- Find a job;
- Move from home, find apartment, pay rent, and
- Allow students "room to grow."

Students found classes that pertained directly to their future lives (e.g., on parenting skills, money management, cooking, math basics, computers, or vocational skills) to be the most helpful. They believed transition planning should start earlier, and that general discussions about the future would be most beneficial.

Having a bank account and being responsible for budgeting also aided transition. Listening to students and helping to make their ideas and desires real, can draw families and educators together in a powerful new relationship that contributes to effective transition planning. Creating forums where students and families feel comfortable in speaking and sharing may involve using some of the new person-centered planning tools (e.g. MAPS, Path, Personal Futures Planning) to make meetings less formal and more productive.

**What Are Some Traditional Strategies for Enhancing Family Involvement**

Traditional suggestions for enhancing family involvement center around two main processes. The first, focuses on strengthening home/school communication and the parental role in emphasizing the importance of staying in school and doing well. The second focuses on giving parents a more visible role within the school. While these strategies are effective to enhance involvement and build relationships, transition specialists may need to think of creative ways to apply them to the transition process.

**Home/School Communication:**

- Set up regular telephone and email conversations between parents, and teachers centered around student strengths and visit about work or living experiences that will enhance transition.
- Encourage parents to drop by school to observe a job-skills or parenting class or attending an open house.
• Invite families to attend parent conferences with the student. Give positive reports from both regular education and special education teachers on student progress as well as information on how content and experiences apply to the transition process.

• Encourage families to read and discuss the school handbook with students. Parents of students with intellectual challenges may appreciate a simplified version with icons and key words that make the concepts easier to grasp. This kind of individualized effort may help families feel welcomed and supported in their efforts, enhancing the relationship.

• Provide families with simple one-page “case-studies” written at an elementary reading level that describe student experiences after high school. Encourage families and students to read the studies together and discuss the future.

• Make it profitable for families to visit the school web page by posting helpful information on transition planning, adolescent challenges and suggestions, family support, community learning opportunities and work experiences that parents may access to facilitate their child’s and families transition.

Volunteering or being an audience at school

Although parents are just as busy these days as teachers, many are willing to do anything they believe will help or benefit THEIR child. Families may see these suggestions as more meaningful than a general call to give up time.

• Be a guest speaker by giving a recruitment pitch to students for a specific line of work that is familiar to the parent.

• Be a classroom volunteer at evening meetings in which teens are brought together to make friends, socialize and/or learn about growing up.

• Coaching so that students with disabilities can learn the benefits of teamwork through intramural sports programs (make sure all students are included).

• Chaperoning a field trip to an employment site or youth leadership conference that students with disabilities may attend.

• Tutoring a student to boost functional literacy skills

• Providing clerical support in the classroom by preparing transition handbooks or individualizing school handbooks for students with disabilities.

• Attending school productions, concerts or events in which a son or daughter has an important or meaningful role.

• Attending celebrations of learning assemblies and classroom presentations on job finding, cooking or other life skills.
What are the Best Practice Strategies for Enhancing Family Involvement in Transition?

Teachers are challenged not only to look at traditional practices but research-based practices that have been shown to enhance transition. The following Transition Quality Indicators were developed through research by Dr. Paula Kohler, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These strategies suggest that families need to be given the opportunity, information, training and support needed to become and stay involved.

Family Involvement

1. At a general level, families contribute input to development of staff training.
2. In student-specific planning, families take an active role in planning transition programs and services and are responsible for specific transition steps.

Family Empowerment

1. Families are provided with a directory of available services.
2. There are pre-IEP planning activities so families know what to expect during meetings.
3. Families are encouraged to make informed choices, by being presented with options and implications.

Family Training

1. Families receive training regarding effective advocacy techniques.
2. Families receive training regarding the transition-related planning process.
3. Families receive training about community services and agencies.

Commitment to this level of excellence goes beyond the energy and time that a single teacher can give, and must involve collaborative planning with families, administrators, students, and community leaders. It speaks to staff development, resource allocation and interagency collaboration. Further information about these strategies can be found online at [http://www.vesid.nysed.gov/specialed/transition/tqi.htm](http://www.vesid.nysed.gov/specialed/transition/tqi.htm). Several excellent resources to support family involvement in transition planning are available at this site.

If you a planning or building a transition program that will include steps to enhance family involvement, the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas, Lawrence Kansas [http://www.beachcenter.org/files/TRN-FS-005.pdf](http://www.beachcenter.org/files/TRN-FS-005.pdf) has put together information about exemplary practice. Highlights on family involvement include:

- Family members regularly attend all transition planning meetings.
- Family members are heard, their ideas respected.
- Family members are involved in all decisions that are made by the transition team.
- Family members’ schedules are accommodated to facilitate the planning process (e.g., time and place
• of transition planning meetings are flexible.
• Family members and professionals reach consensus regarding student outcomes.
• Families are provided transition information in a variety of formats.
• Methods and procedures are in place to facilitate families’ future visions for their sons/daughters.
• Professionals use family-friendly practices.

When Schools Are Successful in Involving Families

The transition coalition at Kansas State University is looking for stories about successful transition. The Transition Coalition is part of the Department of Special Education at the University of Kansas. They are supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs. The coalition would like to learn about new, exciting or unique things that have helped young adults with disabilities experience a successful transition. Some examples are:

1. A story telling what one student did to overcome obstacles in order to enjoy a life of his or her own.
2. A story of how a sibling has worked to help a brother or sister develop friendships and natural supports in school and community.
3. A description of a school program which included successful strategies for reducing the dropout rates of youth at risk of dropping out of school.
4. A description of specific programs and services for youth with disabilities developed by a Center for Independent Living or other community agency.

They can be found on the web at:
http://www.transitioncoalition.org/form/pdfs/MosBrochure.pdf

What We Know About Family Involvement in Transition

Family involvement is not likely to happen just because it should. Recognizing that families are already involved and have been for some time in their child’s life and development is an important first step. Getting families involved in the educational efforts of schools is another matter. An exemplary level of family involvement during transition requires strategic planning, individualized and persistent efforts, effective teacher and administrative training and district commitment of resources. We already know what we have without that involvement. To learn what we will get with additional involvement requires change and new initiatives if we are to move beyond rhetoric to effective action.
References

Beach Center on Families and Disability. Quality Indicators of Exemplary Transition Programs The University of Kansas Lawrence, Kansas at http://www.beachcenter.org/files/TRN-FS-005.pdf September 2002


