

# The Basics of Transition

By Fran Nickey, M.S.

As the parent of a child with disabilities, as well as a writer and editor, I've had access to a great deal of information about children with special needs and their families. In fact, researching and sharing information to assist families and professionals in addressing the many issues and challenges faced by children with special needs is the only area I write about, and it has been for years.

It seems to me that I should have at least read enough information by this time to have covered all of the major areas of raising a son or daughter with disabilities. After all, I've always tried to be prepared for whatever would come next in my children's development. But next week, my son Greg, who has moderate special needs, will turn 16 years old. I can't believe it! He was just six such a short while ago. And yes, he does have some transition information and services written in the transition portion of his Individualized Education Program (IEP). But I'm afraid that although I've read quite a few articles on transition, I really didn't take time to consider, process, digest and reconsider all of the information that was provided about transition, in relation to Gregory and our family.

Time is a precious commodity. Parents of children with disabilities often struggle to handle (sometimes even just to survive) the many daily responsibilities of raising a youngster with special needs. It can seem overwhelming — even impossible — to take the time and energy to consider the long-term future of a daughter or son who has disabilities. But it's not just an important thing to do — it's mandatory.

## Part of the IEP Process

The IEP is the written document that serves as the framework for the special education and related services provided for a student. Parents and teachers refer to the IEP throughout the year and use it as a guide to make sure their child or student is progressing as anticipated and everyone involved with providing services is on the same page. Although I know a little about the the process of transition, I don't have a real sense of what is involved and why it's so important.

Let's explore the most basic components of transition and transition services. No "coordinated set of activities," no "seamless transfer of services," and definitely no "linkages to adult service providers," just the most basic components: the who, when, what, why, and how of transition planning and services.

## When?

When should transition planning begin? The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that a student's IEP begin to include plans for transition at 14 years of age. By the time the student is 16 years old at the latest, discussions on post-school options and how to connect with adult service providers should begin.

Actually, you probably started planning for transition years ago without even realizing it. Each time you gave your son or daughter an opportunity to choose between two or more options, a few different menu items at a restaurant or a choice of two outfits to wear — no matter how insignificant it may have seemed at the time, you were preparing your child to take responsibility for making good choices and supporting the reason why the choice he or she made was a good one.

## Who?

Who participates on the team? After all the years of gathering and reading information, finding out about your child's rights and making sure he or she received all that they've been entitled to, it's time to step aside — not out of the picture entirely, but definitely to the side. The IEP team includes the school principal or designee, the student's teachers and parents or guardians, school staff such as the guidance counselor and psychologist and the team may include transition support staff.

"The student is the most important member of the IEP team. He or she becomes the decision-maker and moves into a leadership role with parents and school staff as supporting members," says Ginny Brennan, Coordinator of Career and Transition Services in the Fairfax County Office of Special Education. However, you can imagine that your son or daughter won't magically and suddenly gain the information, knowledge and skills necessary to be an effective self-advocate. After all, learning to be an effective advocate on behalf of our children has taken most of us years. Brennan explains, "Most students will need assistance from parents and school staff in order to prepare to take on this role. Parents can talk with their son or daughter prior to the meeting to help them articulate their goals and dreams and discuss possible educational goals. The (other) IEP team members must remember to talk to the student and not one another so the student is encouraged to take an active role in discussing his or her dreams and goals with the group." And, in fact, beginning one year in advance of their 18th birthday, your son or daughter will be told that he or she will make IEP decisions once he or she turns 18.

## Why?

Why doesn't the parent or guardian just continue in his or her role as decision-maker and the child's primary advocate? Every person, regardless of whether he or she has a disability or not, has the right to live and work like others — to make choices and decisions that directly affect their own lives. It's not that once a child turns 18, parents are no longer involved at all. Far from it. But the family members, including parents and guardians need to act in a new capacity.

The family can provide information about how they view the student's interests and abilities and offer insight about activities and achievements relating to transitioning from high school to the adult world. It's important for families to work with the student to choose transition goals and assist him or her in meeting those goals by arranging for related experiences at home and in the community. "Parents can help their son or daughter develop or enhance decision-making skills by encouraging them to make choices in their personal lives while helping them understand the consequences of those

decisions." says Brennan. But that's not as simple as it might sound. She continues, "It is not easy to watch your child live with a decision that you would not have made, but it is critical to becoming a self-advocate. At the same time, parents and school staff and other transition support staff need to continue to work as a team to support the individual as he or she takes those important steps."

## What?

What is included in the transition portion of the IEP? Like the IEP, the ITP is a legal document. It includes the student's interests, strengths and goals in such areas as career, independent living, self-advocacy, and interpersonal and social development. Also included are school and post-school transition services in areas such as instruction, related services, community experiences, daily living skills, objectives for adult living and employment, and functional vocational evaluations when indicated.

The IEP may also include activities that will help the student prepare to meet their goals after graduation. Such activities can consist of a variety of combinations of vocational training, inde-

pendent or supported employment, community participation, continuing and adult education, and/or post-secondary education. As the student moves closer to graduation, more specific information is added to address further education, training or employment plans after high school and the student is given opportunities to connect with adult agencies such as the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS).

## How?

How can you be sure that your child can handle the many responsibilities of being an effective self-advocate? Actually, you can't, but what you can do is be there to offer guidance when asked, stay connected to your son or daughter, talk to your child and listen to what he or she has to say. Continue to be a good role model and help your son or daughter communicate effectively. Let your child know when he or she demonstrates growth as a self-advocate and most of all encourage your son or daughter to be the best that he or she can. In the end, isn't that what all parents want for their children? ■

## **The Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS)** *Meeting the Transition Needs of Students with Disabilities*

The Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) provides services to individuals who have been determined to have a disability that presents problems or may present problems in obtaining or maintaining employment. Much of the focus of the DRS is on determining what services might be necessary to assist an individual with a disability in obtaining his or her chosen goals.

Although the DRS provides many services for adults with disabilities, it has also developed a strong relationship with the Department of Education and works extensively with students and schools to assist in meeting the transition needs of students with disabilities.

### **Services for Students**

The DRS has approximately one hundred rehabilitation counselors across the commonwealth who provide services to school-aged consumers. Counselors are assigned to work with local school divisions and assist in identifying students who could be referred to DRS for appropriate services. These services can consist of one or a combination of consultation with the school, career exploration and assessments, vocational counseling and guidance, referral for comprehensive evaluations (to the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center-WWRC), placement and follow-along services.

The DRS also assists students with disabilities in transitioning from high school to post-secondary options in order to secure employment. In addition, if a consumer meets the financial needs participation criteria, DRS may be able to assist with cost services such as training or other cost services to assist the individual in reaching his or her chosen goals.

### **Professional Training**

The Department of Rehabilitation works as a fellow collaborator with the Department of Education to provide training for professionals in rehabilitation and education to ensure that quality services are available to students with disabilities.

For additional information about the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services and how to become a consumer, please call 800-552-5019 and ask for the education services manager.