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ABSTRACT

Vocational educators and special needs personnel face many challenges as they address the educational needs of urban youth and update vocational programs in large inner city school districts. Vocational education programs must take a holistic approach to meet the needs of a wide range of disadvantaged students. Demographic projections of increased proportions of nonwhite students in urban areas underscore the need for personnel who can serve culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Because as many as 40% of minority students live in poverty, the risk factors associated with persistent poverty must also be taken into account. Predictions that the majority of new entrants to the work force will be females, nonwhites, and immigrants mean that sex and race stereotyping in program placement and training opportunities must be overcome. Pressures for higher skill levels among workers also make postsecondary training imperative. To meet the challenges posed by demographic and work force trends, it is recommended that vocational programs implement early intervention to ensure equal access of urban special needs students, beginning at the middle school. Flexible instructional programming and support services are needed to provide alternatives for diverse student groups. Interagency planning and comprehensive service coordination are needed to help disadvantaged individuals throughout each stage of transition from school to work. Multiple or second-chance opportunities for education, training, and employment help ensure that special needs students participate in training opportunities and succeed in the workplace. (28 references). (YLB)

Serving Urban Youth with Special Needs in Vocational Education: Issues and Strategies for Change

TASPP Bulletin

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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS PROGRAM

Concepts and Issues

Serving Urban Youth with Special Needs in Vocational Education: Issues and Strategies for Change

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The challenges for educators who serve in urban schools have been well documented throughout the 1980's. These educators tend to work in buildings that are among the oldest in the nation, work with students who present difficult challenges in terms of social and academic conduct, work with students who are often referred to as economically "truly disadvantaged," and experience some of the highest dropout rates among their student population in the nation (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Committee on Policy for Racial Justice, 1989; Maeroff, 1988; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988).

Vocational educators and special needs personnel continue to face the difficult challenges of addressing the educational needs of urban youth and of updating vocational programs in large inner city school districts. Although disadvantaged students take more vocational courses, these students choose from the most limited range of vocational offerings (National Assessment of Vocational Education (NAVE), 1989). Moreover, "schools with the largest percentage of disadvantaged students offer 40 percent fewer vocational courses, a third as many occupational programs, and half as many advanced courses as do schools with the smallest percentage of disadvantaged students" (NAVE, 1989, p. xii). Problems associated with tracking students into lower level curriculum (Oakes, 1985) and into isolated prevocational tracks are documented throughout the history of urban schools (Tropea, 1987).

The need for program improvement in vocational education programs serving large numbers of disadvantaged individuals has been recognized in the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Applied Technology Act of 1990. The intent of the new legislation is to target funds for economically disadvantaged and special needs populations (American Vocational Association, 1990) and has significant implications for urban schools. The term special needs in vocational education encompasses a wide range of students including those with disabilities, economically and academically disadvantaged, single parents, incarcerated youth, and those in need of second chance programming or retraining. Alternative and diverse strategies that take a more holistic approach for assisting urban special needs students gain access to and complete vocational programs are needed at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Demographic Trends

The changing ethnic composition of student populations in urban areas requires attentive consideration when revising vocational service delivery strategies during the 1990's. Currently, 22 of the 25 largest school districts are predominantly minority (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). Demographic projections for the year 2000 estimate that one-third of the school population will be nonwhite (Hodgkinson, 1985). Today, African-Americans constitute the largest nonwhite sector of the population followed by Hispanics and Asian-Americans (Hodgkinson, 1985). Demographic shifts in population trends underscore the need for trained personnel who can serve culturally and linguistically diverse students in vocational education programs and employment based settings. The overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs (Wyche, 1989) also has implications for increasing the number of vocational support personnel who can assist these students enter and complete vocational programs.

A challenge to educators who serve large numbers of minority students is that as many as 40% live with families who meet the poverty criterion (Levin, 1985; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). Risk factors associated with persistent poverty include school failure, welfare receipt, marginal labor participation, and female headed households. Single mothers and nonemployed young men in inner cities, who struggle to break the generational cycles of poverty and unemployment, are recognized as truly disadvantaged individuals. Clearly, working with truly disadvantaged students requires altemative strategies for successful vocational, employment, and post-secondary program experiences (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). New legislation has targeted these populations in terms of assisting individuals move from welfare dependency to self-sufficiency. Title II of P.L. 100-485, The Family Support Act of 1988, targets education, job training, child care, and other supportive services to parents under the age of 24 who have dropped out of school and lack work experience (Ganzglass & McCart, 1990).

The alarming rise in teen pregnancies for low income and minority students (Bempechat & Ginsburg, 1989) demands the need for flex-

ible instructional vocational programming and support services. Many pregnant teens who remain single parents can expect to eam incomes which are only one-half that of mothers who give birth later in life (Hodgkinson, 1989). The plight of single parents received increased attention in the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984. However, the NAVE report (1989) indicated that funds under the single parent and homemaker set asides were used more often for counseling than for direct instructional services (NAVE, 1989). This finding coupled with the fact that low socioeconomic females experienced more sex stereotyped enrollment bias in vocational education, point to the need to examine strategies that will increase options for urban females to participate in vocational education and enter the workforce.

Workforce Trends

Recent projections indicate that the majority of individuals entering the workforce in the 1990's will be females, nonwhites, and immigrants (Hodgkinson, 1989). As urban education leaders seek to improve vocational education, overcoming sex and race stereotyping in program placement and training opportunities becomes critical in light of demographic trends and workforce projections.

The changing prerequisites for entry into the workforce, such as higher skill levels, have been documented throughout the 1980's. Johnston and Packer (1987), in the Workforce 2000 report, also predict that many new jobs will require post-secondary training. Unfortunately, minorities and economically disadvantaged individuals were found to have the lowest rates of program completion in post-secondary vocational education programs (NAVE, 1989). Avenues to increase the participation of at-risk students in post-secondary programs have been examined (Brown, 1989) and deserve increased attention as the new Perkins Act is implemented.

As culturally diverse groups enter the workforce, McNett (1983, p.6) acknowledges that "minority populations represent an underdeveloped national resource that will become increasingly important to the nation's economic, political, and military strength as the majority population ages." Politicians have sought to ensure that the U.S. remains competitive in the global economic marketplace by focusing attention on underserved populations, and on the need to upgrade the educational and vocational preparation of all individuals. Indeed, the purpose of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Applied Technology Act of 1990 is to ensure that the U.S. remains competitive in the world economy (American Vocational Association, 1990).

Recommendations for Intervention

Demographic and workforce trends have had a profound impact on the educational reform movement, and remain pressing issues for both school teachers and educational school leaders today. A number of the recommendations for restructuring school at the middle and secondary level (e.g., Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990) parallel recommendations for reforming vocational education programs (e.g., NAVE, 1989; Maryland Commission on Vocational-Technical Education, 1989). Common themes include improving the academic rigor of courses, setting high expectations for students, increasing collaborative planning between local communities and schools, and offering community-based experiences to youth. For vocational education personnel in urban settings, these themes correspond with a need for innovative interventions that address student access and retention, expansion of quality vocational programs, and comprehensive service coordination strategies that extend into the formative post-secondary years. Basic to any extensive long-term strategy for reform is the assumption that educators, employers, and community service personnel engage in discussions that transcend traditional thinking about vocational education programming content and delivery methods.

Early Intervention to Ensure Equal Access

Strategies to ensure that urban special needs students have equal access to quality vocational programs must be foremost in the minds of regular, vocational, and special educators. In general, problems associated with low-level tracking, ability grouping, truancy, and academic failure are evident during the middle school years and demand keen attention if students are to learn about and access vocational education (Smith, Walker, & Baker, 1987; Wells, 1989). For vocational education administrators, interventions at the middle school level require collaborative and flexible approaches to scheduling, classroom release time for teachers to develop community-based experiences, and examination of current requirements (e.g., grade level) for entry into vocational programs.

The Quality Education for Minorities Project (1990) recommends a renewed emphasis on making career and college options known to students during the middle school years. The importance of informing students about the availability of vocational education programs, as previously mandated in P.L. 98-524, becomes even more critical in light of the NAVE (1989) findings regarding disadvantaged students' lack of access to a wide range of programs. Intervention strategies to ensure students stay in school long enough to access vocational programs include: (a) providing stimulating prevocational programs that prepare students for a range of vocational opportunities, (b) creating exploratory programs for students to observe vocational education programs in secondary and post-secondary settings, (c) establishing outreach and recruitment efforts in alternative settings, such as church and community centers, (d) assigning of peer and adult vocational education mentors to work with special needs students, (e) increasing vocational assessment experiences to include middle schools students, and (f) undertaking periodic assessments of vocational program offerings to evaluate enrollment patterns and relevance for special needs populations.

Flexible Instructional Programming

Implementing alternative strategies to promote access to and successful completion of vocational programs for urban youth requires educators to depart from traditional instructional programming methods. All too often, students are placed in learning situations that are designed to be convenient for teachers and administrators. Flexible instructional programming gives students, teachers, and administrators the latitude to explore methods for creating alternative educational opportunities that are responsive to needs of diverse students (Leak, in press). For example, one alternative vocational high school has piloted a program which allows students to earn credit in academic areas (English and Math) while placed in community-based work sites (Prince George's County Public Schools, 1989). Students must complete a specified number of hours at the work site and complete a series of learning activities packages that incorporate competencies and assignments relevant to the academic subject. Instructor's duties have been extended from providing support in vocational classrooms to coordi-

nating the alternative program in the community. Funds to pilot the program came from P.L. 98-524, Title III, Community-Based Organizations. Another option that has proved useful in terms of designing alternative education is partnerships between business and industry and urban schools (see Business Advisory Commission of the Education Commission of the States, 1985).

As educators strive to integrate increased academic skills in vocational programs and increase disadvantaged students access to advanced vocational programs, it will be important to provide flexible support services to ensure successful completion. Many of the vocational support models developed during the past decade provide an excellent framework for service delivery and training instructional support personnel (Leconte & Neubert, 1987).

Service Coordination

The importance of interagency planning and service coordination for individuals with disabilities has received increased recognition through the implementation of transition models. In recent years, it has become clear that comprehensive service coordination strategies are also needed to assist disadvantaged individuals negotiate educational and community services for extended periods of time (Hodgkinson, 1989; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988; Wircenski, 1990).

While service coordination strategies for students with special needs should begin during the preschool years and extend throughout the young adult years, vocational educators can play a greater role in providing service coordination strategies to assist these students during the transition process. An example of one local education agency initiative is the Vocational Transition Program (Neubert, Leney, Rothenbacher, & Krishnaswami, in press). The program utilizes a case management framework for providing services to students as they exit vocational education programs. On-going assessment, planning, linking, monitoring, advocacy assistance, and mentoring are provided through part-time case managers, funded by the local school system. Case managers assist special needs students with matching their vocational training with related job opportunities, access community services, and post-secondary programs.

A final recommendation for expanding services for special needs populations in urban settings is the implementation of "multiple added-chance opportunities" or "second-chance opportunities" for education, training, and employment (Smith et al., 1987; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). The idea of service coordination is inherent in developing programs that allow young adults multiple opportunities to succeed in employment settings and participate in post-secondary training opportunities that enhance job advancement.

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