

Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition



National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth
With Disabilities to Achieve
Successful Futures

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Putting Interagency Agreements into Action

By Kelli Crane, Meredith Gramlich, and Kris Peterson

Issue: Interagency agreements among educational and noneducational agencies can help maximize resources and services for transitioning youth. What are the components of successful interagency agreements, and how can they be implemented?

Defining the Issue

Schools and human services agencies responsible for serving individuals with disabilities have typically operated in isolation or from uncoordinated agendas. However, over the past decade, coordinated planning through the use of interagency agreements has been recognized as an effective method to serve youth with disabilities in their transition processes (Hadden, Fowler, Fink, & Wischnowski, 1995).

Yet youth with disabilities exiting high school often fail to access the adult services they need. One of the reasons for this failure is the difficulty in enforcing interagency agreements because of shared agency responsibility (Hadden et al., 1995). In many cases, transition stakeholders state that interagency agreements lack an agency or staff person to promote or enforce them and that the agreements lack substance. This brief will examine interagency agreements and the components of successful implementation, and it will showcase implementation in one state.

What We Know

A major barrier to postschool employment and related outcomes for youth with disabilities and families is the lack of access to needed adult services (e.g., vocational rehabilitation, postsecondary education, residential services, etc.) and supports (e.g., Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, waived programs, etc.). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA) require a sharing of transition programming responsibilities among special, vocational, general, and postsecondary education; employment services; vocational rehabilitation; social services; and mental health services. Yet despite this mandate, young people with disabilities, their families, and the educational professionals who support them during transition often fail to receive critical and timely information and assistance from agency personnel (Johnson, Sharpe, & Sinclair, 1997).

In addition, many educational and agency personnel have neither access to outside agency information nor experience in working with other agencies. Therefore, they cannot assist youth and families in analyzing the interface between benefits, employment, and reporting and eligibility requirements within and across each agency.

Interagency coordination provides an important solution to this problem. Interagency collaboration for students with disabilities brings together community agencies to focus their collective expertise and combined resources to improve the quality of transition planning and coordinated services. Interagency planning and coordination may be supported through a variety of mechanisms. These include memoranda of understanding, interagency agreements, a transition coordinator assigned to work with other participating agencies, and guidelines for working with other agencies identified as potential service providers. The purpose of interagency collaboration, through the use of agreements among various agencies, is to facilitate smooth and seamless transitions for youth and information sharing among educators, adult service providers, and families.

Interagency coordination at the state and local levels also reduces the gap in service delivery, minimizes duplication of services, and decreases unnecessary expenses. Interagency transition teams not only implement interagency agreements, but they provide a mechanism for the school to access and share information and draw on community resources and services. Research shows that sustained interagency collaboration improves transition outcomes for youth with disabilities (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 2000).

Interagency Agreements

An interagency agreement is a commitment of shared responsibility for student learning and a plan for the school, community, and family to collaborate in achieving positive adult outcomes for youth with disabilities. These agreements can be written at the state and/or local level. Legislation requiring state and local agreements can also promote greater participation.

Although interagency agreements are required by federal regulations under Parts B and C of IDEA, the contents of interagency agreements vary from state to state and community to community. Effective interagency agreements include statements regarding purpose, operating principles and procedures, inventories of existing services and funding sources, dispute resolution, cross-agency training, and service coordination (Hadden et al., 1995; Kilburn & Critchlow, 1998). All agreements recognize the necessity for various agencies to collaborate

in order to assure quality and comprehensive, non-duplicative, and continuous services. Agreements typically do not add new requirements for agencies. Rather, they maximize the unique services and mandates of individual agencies for the benefit of youth and their families.

Interagency collaborative roles, responsibilities, and lines of communication are clarified in an interagency agreement. The strength of an agreement lies in the integrity with which collaborators follow through on their responsibilities as outlined in the agreement, though the agreement usually does not include punitive measures for lack of follow-through. **Table 1** highlights essential features of effective interagency agreements.

Example: Delaware

In May 1997, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE), all 19 school districts in the state, and the Delaware Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DDVR) signed an interagency cooperative agreement for the purpose of improving the quality and coordination of services for youth with disabilities in transition. At the same time, Delaware had just received a federal transition systems change grant designed to enhance transition services to provide better outcomes for Delaware's youth with disabilities. The timing of these two efforts resulted

Table 1: Essential Features of Effective Interagency Agreements

- Responsibility for design, revision, and implementation of the agreement by participating agency staff
 - Commitment in the development and implementation of the agreement by participating agency directors
 - Input from direct service staff in the design, revision, and implementation of the agreement
 - Regular opportunities to meet, discuss ideas, and develop relationships
 - Willingness to learn from each other and see how each can benefit from the mission of the other organizations
 - Active involvement in strategic planning by participating agency representatives
 - Utilization of data to determine the impact and outcomes resulting from the agreement
 - Utilization of data for strategic planning and continuous improvement
 - Dissemination of the agreement to direct service practitioners
 - Technical assistance provided to direct service practitioners regarding implementation of the agreement
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Table 2: Facts about Transition Services and Outcomes in Delaware

- There has been an increase in the number of students receiving transition services in FY2003 (from 883 to 966).
- Of the students receiving transition services in 2003, 60% were students with significant disabilities.
- The number of transitioning students who have achieved successful employment outcomes increased from 241 in 2002 to 261 in 2003.
- Thirty-one percent (31%) of transition students continued on to vocational skills training and/or postsecondary education in two- to four-year colleges or universities after high school in 2003.
- An average of 95% of transitioning students who entered employment in the community earned at least Delaware's minimum wage of \$6.15 per hour.
- Among the transitioning students who obtained employment in FY2000, 100% of individuals who responded to the job retention survey were still working after two years.
- According to data received from DDOE over the past five years, DDVR's involvement in School-to-Work Transition has greatly contributed to the decrease in the dropout rate from 7.9% to 5.2% for students receiving special education services.
- For the first time in 2002, the dropout rate for special education students fell below the rate for regular education students (6.3%) and for minority students (African American—8.9% and Hispanic—11.5%) in Delaware (Dennison, 2003).

in significant changes in outcomes for students with disabilities in the state (see **Table 2**). A major reason for this has been the attention state and local agencies have given to meeting their collective responsibilities through this interagency cooperative agreement.

First, DDVR and DDOE agency directors made the commitment to improve interagency collaboration. Both DDVR and DDOE identified staff with transition services planning as their primary responsibility. At the local level, each school district's superintendent signed the agreement. The interagency cooperative agreement served as the guide for improving coordination among the agencies.

Leaders at the director level enforced the agreement. The success of the agreement also depended on sharing goodwill, following procedures, and providing all stakeholders clear information regarding their responsibilities.

Delaware used the cooperative agreement to encourage the hiring of transition personnel in each district who co-

ordinate school responsibilities within the agreement. Most districts now have full-time personnel to carry out these responsibilities. Others have given teachers the responsibility. DDOE annually provides these individuals with data to help with continuous program improvement. Each district is required to conduct self-assessments that include transition and to identify strategies for improvement.

Delaware's commitment and improved communication led to DDVR counselors being assigned transition caseloads in all of Delaware high schools. The counselors hold regular office hours in the schools and meet regularly with local transition personnel. Results of the interagency cooperative agreement include improved data collection and sharing; cross-agency training; regular meetings at the local, regional, and state levels; and significantly improved outcomes for students.

Conclusion

In summary, the establishment of interagency agreements promotes greater collaboration in agency planning and service provision for youth with disabilities. No single agency has the fiscal or personnel resources, the knowledge, or the legislative mandate to plan and deliver the multitude of services essential for effective transition planning. Interagency agreements implemented by productive, organized, and resourceful cross-agency teams are the foundation of effective and cohesive transition programming.

Resources

Delaware Transition Initiative

For further information about the Delaware interagency agreement, contact Mark Chamberlin, Delaware Transition Initiative, at 302-739-4667 or mchamberlin@doe.k12.de.us.

Web Sites

1998 Amendments to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: Interagency Agreements. The Postsecondary Education Programs Network.

<http://www.pepnet.org/interagency-1.asp>

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