

The Choices Project: Piloting a Secondary Transition Planning Database

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Abstract: The CHOICES Project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education, addresses the need for ready access to information for parents, students, school, and community agency personnel regarding transitional and community support programs. At this time we have created two databases (student information and community information), five applications (student game, student survey, parent, teacher, community questionnaires) to populate those databases, and a web site to host them in addition to transition- related content.

Introduction

Special education law requires formal transition planning from the time a child with disabilities is 16 years of age. For successful transition, community agencies and public school systems must coordinate the transition of service responsibilities. This transition can occur only with ongoing communication regarding existing programs, future program needs, and training expectations. These transition functions are not possible without ready access to timely information. Although educational and community service agencies are charged with the design and provision of individualized programs, it falls on the family to advocate for those programs that are most appropriate or most preferred. Participation by students and parents is required as part of the education and transition training and planning process. But for this participation to be effective, students and parents must be empowered to make informed choices.

The CHOICES Project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), National Center for Special Education Research, (NCSER) U.S. Department of Education, addresses the need for ready access to information for parents, students, school, and community agency personnel regarding transitional and community support programs. CHOICES is a project that has developed a transition planning information system. This system includes a database of student and family information, community supports and services, and curriculum guides. Students, parents, and teachers will use the system to match personal goals and aspirations with specific adult outcomes and training programs to attain them. Training is provided in using the system and how to advocate effectively within the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and Transition Planning processes.

Specifically, families and students with disabilities participate in training focused upon the development of advocacy, self-determination, and person centered planning skills. This training enables families and students to more effectively participate in the IEP process as well as in the transition planning part of IEP development. Similar training is provided for the teachers.

We have been very systematic in our development process. At the outset we realized that we as special educators used different terminology to describe outcome measures. For example we talked about variables, where

as our technology team in Computer science described entities and attributes. Bridging this terminology was only part of the issue. Building the database required the “tech team” to understand at least at a basic level the entire special education and transition process. We accomplished this in part by using transition assessment textbooks.

At this time we have created two databases (student information and community information), five applications (student role-playing game, student survey, parent, teacher, community questionnaires) to populate those databases, and a web site to host them in addition to transition-related content. We have also created editors that allow us and other users to easily change content in the applications and web site. We have built into the system flexibility to change with different populations or outcome measures. For example, although we are collecting data currently from our local area, we can easily expand statewide. We can also add other states with a completely different set of items in the applications. In addition, we have created all of the advocacy training modules.

The scale of effort involved in developing the database and software systems can be estimated by the number of database tables and lines of software code. The database contains 78 tables with approximately 800 data fields and 255 stored procedures containing approximately 500 lines of code. The student role-playing game consists of approximately 89,000 lines of code and hundreds of individual vectorized images. The parent/teacher software system consists of approximately 75 individual web pages with approximately 23,000 lines of software code. The community system is approximately 3,500 lines of code. All the software systems are integrated through a common website. The system provides information explaining the transition domains which is followed by a questionnaire to collect the information about the domains. The domains are mapped as: Who I Am, What I Can Do, Daily Living, Community Participation, Employment, and Post Secondary Education. In this way the interface that the user sees is more consistent with a future planning model.

The database design and software systems were frequently and rigorously reviewed and tested. There were regular stakeholder reviews by our Advisory Board. The developers and project team conducted multiple sessions of functional testing. With each testing session, revisions were documented and implemented in the software systems. Age appropriate children were enlisted for a pre-pilot user acceptance test. Testing data were compiled from direct observation and written comments of the children. The development team performed regression testing with each new build, at least one per week. Regression testing involves checking that the software system still performs as specified with the new change.

Positive Transition Outcomes

Overall, parents of children with disabilities are not meaningfully involved in developing their child’s IEP; Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002; Lovitt & Cushing, 1994; Thompson, Fulk, & Piercy, 2000). Parents of high school students with disabilities participate in IEP meetings less than those of students at younger ages (Lynch & Stein, 1982) and may not fully participate in IEP transition planning. Heron and Harris (2001) provided three suggestions about why this may occur. First, the meetings can be conducted without the parent and/or student attending the meeting. Secondly parents and students do not know about services, supports, nor have they thought about future goals. Finally, they posit that school personnel do not encourage parent or student attendance or meaningful participation. As for students with disabilities, they are often invited to IEP meetings once they are a certain age or have certain skills, but they receive very little information about the meetings (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). While students may attend their IEP meetings, they often do not participate in the meetings (Powers, et al, 2005). As a result IEPs are composed of goals that were developed by professionals with little student or parent input (Lovitt & Cushing, 1994; Martin et al.;2004; Whitney-Thomas, Shaw, Honey, & Butterworth, 1998). As a consequence of this students with disabilities often drop out of high school because they are not working on transition goals that are important to them. Hill (2010) noted that there was a positive relationship between the presence of students at their IEP meetings and graduation rates. Our community has a large number of special education students who have dropped out before completing high school.

Cobb and Alwell (2009) completed a meta-analysis of transition interventions. Their review lists the five areas that are important in positive transition outcomes; they include student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, interagency/ interdisciplinary planning and program structure.

In the area of **student-focused planning**, we know that a positive relationship exists between students’ participation in their IEP development and academic achievement (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). Powers,

et al (2005) found that although the majority of students sign off on their IEPs, very few actually take an active role in the planning process. Students with disabilities who actively participate in their own IEP planning show greater degrees of motivation, goal- achievement, and in turn, self-determination (as cited by Barnard-Brak, et al. 2010). Cobb and Alwell (2009) suggest that in order for transition planning to be successful, students must feel that they are validated by the team and that their input is valuable during IEP meetings.

In the area of **student development**, it has been found that if students with disabilities are provided with focused vocational training, the outcome is that they are able to achieve a valuable perspective of their interests which can help guide transition planning (Cobb & Alwell, 2009). Students may obtain employment, but not experience success in retaining employment if the appropriate supports are not put into place through the transition planning process (Cobb & Alwell, 2009). Findings by Morningstar (1997) suggest that it may be valuable for students to participate in explicit instruction throughout school in order for students to learn how to generalize important life skills which can also benefit them in employment settings such as problem-solving, social skills, and goal setting to name a few. Shogren and Plotner (2012) found that approximately one third of secondary students with disabilities have not participated in any type of explicit skills training related to the transition process and 34% of secondary students diagnosed with autism do not have IEPs which relate transition goals to instruction. Woods, Sylvester, and Martin (2010) also found that students who participated in explicit student-centered instruction regarding transition planning showed a significantly better understanding of the transition planning process as well more confidence in their own role related to transition.

In the area of **family involvement**, it has been noted by Martin, et al. (2004) that when students and parents attend IEP meetings, although the students are the least active participants, parents report feeling more comfortable with the discussion and the IEP process when their children are present at the meeting. Hill (2010) also noted that there was a positive relationship between the presence of students at their IEP meetings and graduation rates. Hertherington, et al. (2010) found that both students and their parents felt unprepared and confused about the transition process. Given that Morningstar (1997) found that students rely heavily on their parents for guidance regarding their career choice, agencies would benefit from having the student and parents as active participants in the planning process.

In the area of **interagency/ interdisciplinary planning**, Shogren and Plotner (2012) cited that unfortunately for students with disabilities, many schools do not fulfill the requirement of interagency collaboration (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002). However, Noonan, Morningstar, and Erickson (2008) found that in schools which adhere to best practices for transition, there were some common indicators such as strong administrative support, transition coordinators who were allowed flexible schedules for collaboration activities, joint funding with other agencies for better service delivery, technical assistance from the SEA, ongoing positive relationships between not only the transition coordinator and community agencies, but also between the student and those agencies. Training families about available community agencies and transition issues was a common theme.

In the area of **program structure** Williams-Dihem and Lynch (2007) found that most students would prefer to receive more input and direction from their teachers, but unfortunately, teachers are not typically provided with enough time to commit to the individual guidance of students and their families to provide this kind of support. Heffernan (2012) found that teachers often do not feel confident in their skills related to the development and execution of effective transition plans. A study conducted by Rehfeldt, Clark, and Lee (2012) provided support for the need of a “systematic assessment of strengths, preferences, interests, and needs” of students with disabilities to meet mandates set forth by the IDEA. Steele, Konrad, and Test (2005) suggest that if a student receives high quality transition services, positives outcomes may be the result, despite a lack of a high quality transition plan

Discussion

Our Advisory Board is comprised of state agency personnel and local school officials who are experts in transition. They were very helpful in that they provided very specific feedback on our progress. For example, our first attempts at training videos were very comprehensive. They encouraged us to shorten them significantly. As such we went from almost 2 hours of training videos down to about 40 minutes. They additionally helped us to keep the questionnaires short. Our goal is for anyone to complete the training and data entry in less than 90 minutes.

We knew that we had to create a process that was easy to access, did not require a great deal of time, and had beneficial outcomes for the participants. For the students we wanted them to understand the transition process, feel comfortable in their participation and also see it as beneficial to them. We incorporated a self determination type model to facilitate this. For parents we felt it important that they get good information on the process, understand their rights, and help them develop a path that could be useful in planning for their child's future. For the teachers we wanted them to be informed about the training provided to the parents and students, and provide information that would help them to do their job without a significant increase or even better a decrease in their workload.

All participants receive advocacy training concerning special education and the transition process. This information sets the stage for them to respond to questions about transition and adult living. The questions gather information using a person-centered planning process that describes the students' aspirations for the future, as well as their basic abilities and needed supports. All of this information from the three different informants is incorporated into the Transition Report. The Transition Report is designed to inform the transition planning process at the IEP meeting. By informing the team we provide valuable data that can help them to create a better IEP. From the transition report a second report can be created that lists local community agency resources specific to the aspirations and skills of the student.

Limitations

At this point we have validated the functionality of the software. As we stated in our proposal data collection is just beginning when this proceedings paper is submitted. We are working with three local high schools. As we collect data from student, parent, and teacher teams we also gather feedback on user satisfaction. We designed CHOICES to address the five areas that are important in positive transition outcomes; student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, interagency/ interdisciplinary planning and program structure. The data collection to measure these outcomes is beyond the scope of this initial project. We are seeking additional funding for this and to expand the scope of CHOICES to accommodate more accessibility needs, to create modules for teachers to use with students, and develop a process for families to explore future options to create better personal future plans.

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