Supporting Students in Effective Transitions:
What Students Have to Say

Youth returning to traditional school settings from non-traditional settings, such as alternative schools, **face significant barriers to successful transition.**

After conducting several student focus groups with students at West40, in addition to a literature review, the **Region 9 Comprehensive Center Advisory Board gained perspective on effective practices to help students feel successful and supported.** Alternative settings by design, as evidenced by West40 student experiences, offer strategies that merit consideration in traditional settings. Youth-serving adults in traditional school settings can consider these four recommendations to better support students who are transitioning from an alternative school or are at-risk of dropping out of their traditional school.

> **"At the end of the day, you just need somebody in your corner.** It's support, somebody to hear you, literally just to talk to. We don't need money. We just need somebody there so that we don't feel alone. ** — Student**

Recommendations:

Provide one significant adult for each student

Improve communication with and for students

Re-evaluate punitive disciplinary measures

Create positive learning environments

West40 is a center in Illinois that currently supports 2,500 students considered "at risk" for dropping out of school or who have been suspended or expelled. West40 believes every kid deserves a chance to succeed, and its mission is to meet students where they are and support them. West40's advocacy team[1] plays a significant role in providing this support. They take a holistic approach to working alongside students, including providing social-emotional learning support and filling in the gaps to give the students the support they need to reach their potential and enjoy the journey of learning.

(Details about these recommendations can be found on the second page.)

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[1] The advocacy team consists of teachers, interventionists, and advocates who are adults hired by West40 and carry a caseload of students they work with directly.

Provide one significant adult for each student

Research

At the center of a successful transition is a transition coordinator, an adult who communicates with the transition team and the student. Most importantly, a successful transition depends on individualized attention for the student and individualized wrap-around services.

Student Focus Group

The students reiterated how effective it is to have an advocate's support. Their advocate is someone they can talk to about anything without feeling judged, invested in their personal and academic success, and takes the time to walk through issues with the student and helps them develop a solution.

> "*The way they treat you like family and make you feel successful. They treat you like, let's say your brothers supporting you. More like personal things. You could talk to them without being judged.*" — West40 student

Action Step for Youth-Serving Adults

Ensure that each student has at least one adult they can trust who shows genuine interest in their well-being and helps them explore personal and academic solutions.

References: ii, v, vi, xi, xiii

Improve communication with and for students

Research

Due to a lack of interagency communication, students transitioning face issues with credits transferring properly, and not having a clear support system. With improved communication among members of their transition support team[2], students will have the necessary support before, during, and after their transition to help prepare them, ensure their credits transfer properly, and monitor their progress after their transition.

Student Focus Group

The students also emphasized the importance of engaging students in the conversation and listening to them. Students specified that they can speak openly with their advocates about what they need and appreciate how transparent the advocates are. For example, one student said,

> "*She's always asked me, oh, do you want to let your mom know about this? She asked me or she's like, oh, can I give your mom a call? She'll let me know that she's going to tell her or call her. She's also helped my mom a lot when I was going through things in school, they teamed up really good and they helped me the most.*"

By being involved in the conversation, students are better able to discuss their struggles and needs, and they feel heard and valued as a result.

Action Step for Youth-Serving Adults

Work to improve communication with the student and anyone directly involved with the student to ensure the student and their needs stay at the center of all conversations.

References: i, ii, iii, v, viii, ix, x, xi, xiii, xxi

Re-evaluate punitive disciplinary measures

Research

Some of the literature discusses the importance of using restorative justice practices in lieu of the traditional disciplinary measures, noting that restorative justice is about "building bonds rather than issuing punishments." Restorative justice practices include meditation, restitution, community service, and peacemaking circles.

Student Focus Group

Students also discussed the rigidity of the traditional school system when it comes to punishment and how detrimental that can be to their learning and overall school experience. Specifically, one student said that school staff in the traditional school setting,

> "*Would always pull me out of classes left and right just because if I didn't like doing the work, they would be like, 'No, go to the office.' In this environment [alternative school setting], they'll be like 'No, I know you can do it. Just finish it. I know you can do your best, just try.'*"

In the alternative school setting, students noted they feel like they have the opportunity to discuss the situation and work things out in a more productive manner.

Action Step for Youth-Serving Adults

Consider using restorative justice practices when working with students rather than standard disciplinary practices that are punitive in nature.

References: iv, xiv, xv, xviii

Create positive learning environments

Research

Research indicates the need to strengthen the organizational capacity within a school to better support students. This includes providing professional development opportunities to educators that discuss effective classroom behavior management practices, individualized instruction, culturally responsive instructional practices, and creating positive conditions for learning.

Student Focus Group

Many students wished their school took the opportunity to get to know them and understand how their particular situations may affect their performance in the classroom. The students also discussed how the traditional school structure does not support their personal growth and development.

> "*The teachers are there to teach specifically because we switch classes. They're there for one thing. And to teach you that subject. The teachers have a bunch of students. They don't take the time to get to know you too. It depends because I had some teachers that did. To understand your background, your story and everything.*"

Action Step for Youth-Serving Adults

Take measures to better understand the students' individual situations and identify how the school environment may influence their lives.

References: vii, xvi, xvii, xix, xx

The full literature review and focus group data summary are available on the Region 9 website.

[2] A student's transition support team consists of a transition coordinator, educators, family members, support agencies, and the student.

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