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Supporting the Post-School Goals of Youth with Disabilities through Use of a Transition Coordinator

Andrew Scheef

University of Idaho, Moscow, USA

Julia Mahfouz

University of Idaho, Moscow, USA

Abstract

Principals in the United States are responsible for creating educational environments that enable students, including those with disabilities, to achieve both academic and post-school goals. Unfortunately, many principals lack the preparation necessary to effectively lead special education programs. To support principals and ensure that students with disabilities are prepared for life after high school, school districts may employ transition coordinators. These special education teachers support students with disabilities in identifying and achieving their post-school goals. In this paper, we describe the transition coordinator role and essential job components in detail.

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Introduction

Students with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment, lower pay, and job dissatisfaction relative to their non-disabled peers (Sundar et al., 2018). This may be attributable to the low graduation rates; for example, in the US, when compared to the national average graduation rate of 84.6%, only 67.1% of students with disabilities graduate from high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). As high school graduation is a predictor of positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009), providing services to support students with disabilities at the secondary level may be especially important.

To help address this problem, many nations have legislation that holds schools responsible for identifying and providing special education services to students with disabilities in preparation for workforce (e.g. Cameron & Thygesen, 2015; Lehtomaki, Tuomi, & Mantoya, 2014; Rotatori, Bakken, Obiakor, Burkhardt, & Sharma, 2014). In the United States, legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), emphasize workforce preparation for students with disabilities in the United States. School administrators are responsible for ensuring that educational programs in their buildings meet these legislative requirements. Specifically, principals must supervise special education teachers to ensure that they help identify students' strengths and interests, receive proper training to succeed in the workplace, and are provided with access to sufficient resources, including support personnel, throughout this process. Overall, students with disabilities who receive education and guidance that includes emphasis on transition from high school to the workforce

are more likely to experience positive post-school outcomes (Test et al, 2009). The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) reviewed relevant literature to make recommendations to schools to improve transition services for students with disabilities. The agency found that high-quality transition programs increased the likelihood that an individual with was employed after completing school.

In order to support the post-school needs of students with disabilities, schools may hire a transition coordinator. These practitioners are certified special education teachers who work with students with disabilities to support their post-school goals (Asselin, Todd-Allen, & deFur, 1998). While a special education teacher may be focused on supporting the academic and social needs of students with disabilities, a transition coordinator has a role outside of supporting academic skills.

In this article, we draw on relevant literature and best practices from the field to highlight the significance of transition coordinators in helping ensure that students with disabilities stay in school and receive the training they need to be successful in the workplace. Our belief in the importance of transition coordinators comes from our previous practitioner experiences in the capacity of (a) a special education teacher who served as a transition coordinator and (b) a school administrator who understands strategies to support all students, including those with disabilities. First, we provide a general overview of the history of special education in the United States, highlighting the challenges faced by schools. Then, we describe the role played by school administrators in supporting students with disabilities and how transition coordinators can increase the effectiveness of special education. After describing the transition

coordinator role, we outline a step-by-step process for hiring someone to provide critical support for students with disabilities to ensure they are adequately prepared to enter the workforce.

History of Special Education in the United States

For nearly three decades, school administrators in the United States have been required to comply with federal laws regarding the education of students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Special education used to be segregated from regular instruction, resulting in social isolation for students with disabilities; moreover, standards for special education curricula tended to be low and special education teachers typically had low academic expectations of their students (Turnbull & Cilley, 1999). Today, however, special education is no longer a place in a school building; rather, it has evolved to become an integrated academic and social support system. This system, supported by the least restrictive environment (LRE) provision in IDEA (2004), is designed, implemented, and monitored to ensure that students with disabilities receive the education and training necessary to successfully participate in the workforce (National Association of Elementary School Principals & ILIAD Project, 2001). However, IDEA set minimum baselines for service types of quality and leave room for states, districts, and schools to implement education policies, programs, and practice (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Nelson, 2014).

During the same time period, multiple school reform initiatives aimed at increasing academic rigor in public schools have been implemented in the United States. During the last decade in particular, nearly all 50 states have adopted comprehensive academic standards, with many implementing corresponding accountability

systems to measure the performance of students, teachers, and administrators (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013). These test results are being used throughout the country to determine critical school milestones such as grade promotion and high school graduation, as well as tenure for educators and accreditation for schools (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). Due to the performance accountability metrics associated with reforms and the freedom to select types of services for students in special education that fits their needs, school principals are left struggling on their own to find operating procedures they could implement at their schools to meet the standards and attend to the needs of their students.

School Administrators and Special Education

School administrators have multiple roles to play within the school. As instructional leaders, principals must develop school cultures that set high academic standards for all students (Harper & Andrews, 2010) by fostering effective working relationships based on trust, shared responsibility, collaboration, and teamwork (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000). Effective principals ensure that teachers use proven, research-based practices to improve student performance and that students receive comprehensive, high quality instruction (Benson, 2019; Hall, 2019; Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019). When school leaders focus on fundamental instructional issues, demonstrate strong support for special education, and provide ongoing professional development, academic outcomes improve for students with disabilities and others at risk (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2003; Klingner, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001).

In addition to student outcomes, administrative leadership practices strongly affect teachers' attitudes; in special education contexts, teachers' working conditions are strongly affected by inclusive education practices for students with disabilities (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Moreover, special educators' sense of administrative support and confidence in their abilities to help their students reach their academic goals are strongly influenced by the principal's values and supportive actions, as mediated by overall school culture (Dash & Vohra, 2019). Principal support also significantly affects teacher attitudes (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Dash & Vohra, 2019) and attrition rates (e.g., Whitaker, 2000).

Despite district-level variations in specific duties, generally speaking, principals are responsible for school-level compliance with special education requirements (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). School principals who are well prepared for special education leadership have a strong working knowledge of IDEA policies and procedures, as well as prevalent disabilities and some of the unique learning and behavioral challenges associated with various conditions. Prepared principals also have comprehensive knowledge of research-based special education practices (e.g., positive behavior support, direct instruction, learning strategies, content enhancement; Crockett, 2002).

Unfortunately, many principals lack the coursework and field experience necessary to effectively fulfill the role of special education leader in their buildings (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Dipaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). In fact, DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found that principals' greatest need is for knowledge and support related to implementing special education programs. This knowledge gap is critically important, because when administrators are

inadequately prepared, the effectiveness of special education services suffers.

To help address these challenges, district and community resources can be harnessed to ensure students with unique learning needs receive the best possible educational programming (Hughes, 1999; Pankake & Fullwood, 1999). Utilizing available resources to the fullest extent is especially important for principals who are less prepared to lead special education programs. Transition coordinators are one such resource that can help address many of the challenges associated with meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

What is a Transition Coordinator?

In the field of special education, transition generally refers to the years in which a student with a disability moves from being in compulsory schooling to their post-school life. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014) describes the existence a national-level legal framework as a key factor in the development of vocational training opportunities for youth with disabilities. In the U.S., IDEA (2004) requires that post-school planning begin before a student turns 16-years old. This involves a coordinated set of services designed to support individualized student post-school goals related to continued education or training, employment, community participation, and independent living. Following the language used by Asselin et al. (1998), this article will use the term transition coordinator to refer to a certificated special education teacher whose primary purpose is to address the transition needs of secondary students with disabilities. In order to effectively carry out these responsibilities, many of which involve developing and maintaining community connections, a key feature of this role

involves a flexible daily schedule (Noonan, Morningstar, & Gaumer Erickson, 2008). Although the IDEA (2004) does not specifically describe a transition coordinator as a related service provider, this individual may play a similar role in that this practitioner provides a service that allows an adolescent to receive a free and appropriate education. It is important to recognize that a transition coordinator does not become the sole school-based practitioner who facilitates post-school transition; every teacher should be involved so that their knowledge and expertise can contribute to positive outcomes for the student. However, due to the specialized nature of many transition-related program components, the addition of a dedicated transition coordinator may lead to improved transition services (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). The recently-updated transition specialist training standards (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013) represent the vast amount of knowledge necessary to provide appropriate transition services to students. Motivated and highly-qualified leaders available to provide students with support postschool transition are key components to successful programs (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014).

When looking at data describing post-school outcomes, it is clear that more work is necessary to support students with disabilities. Even with training from schools, students with disabilities struggle to find opportunity and success in post-secondary education attendance, employment, independent living, and community participation (Newman et al., 2011). Although secondary special education teachers may feel comfortable developing transition components of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), they may lack the expertise to provide specialized services necessary to bolster positive post-school outcomes (Benitez, Morningstar, & Frey, 2009). The addition of an assigned transition

coordinator with a flexible daily schedule provides students with more intensive supports to help them achieve post-school goals (Noonan, Morningstar, & Gaumer Erickson, 2008).

What Does a Transition Coordinator Do?

Schools that do not currently have a transition coordinator may require assistance in developing a list of responsibilities with which this individual may be tasked. In order to help define the role of transition coordinator, Asselin et al. (1998) surveyed practitioners and developed and validated a list of nine responsibility categories, including: "intraschool/interagency linkages, interagency linkages, assessment and career counseling, transition planning, education and community training, family support, public relations, program development, and program evaluation" (p. 13). It may also be appropriate to consider the role of transition coordinator as supporting the domains described by Kohler, Gothbery, Fowler, and Coyle (2016). The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 includes Student-Focused Planning, Family Engagement, Program Structures, Interagency Collaboration, and Student Development. Based on our experiences and relevant literature (Asselin et al., 1998; Kohler et al., 2016; Noonan et al., 2008; Rowe et al., 2015; Test et al., 2009), we have compiled and described a list of responsibilities schools may consider when implementing a transition coordinator.

Be a Resource Expert

The large amount of transition-specific materials can be overwhelming. Because special education teachers may not have the time to become familiar with many of these valuable resources, they would benefit from the support of a transition coordinator who has dedicated time to have these resources in-hand. Although each

member of the IEP team brings his or her expertise to contribute to the process, the focus of transition may get lost in the process. When identifying goals and services with transition-age students, it is necessary for post-school goals to be considered (Johnson, 2004). When one individual specializes in helping students and families prepare for post-school life, this individual is naturally going to be familiar with a wide variety of resources to support student goals. Having a practitioner who is focused on transition may help secondary schools develop more IEPs that contain effective and appropriate transition content. Table 1 contains a description of web-based transition resources.

Table 1.

Transition Resources

Publisher	URL	Description
National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT)	https://www.transitionta.org	The NTACT website includes materials that detail and describe effective practices and predictors associated with multiple areas of transition. In addition, they provide supports to practitioners by including hand-on Toolkits and transition-focused webinars.
Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT)	http://community.cec.sped.org/dcdt/publications/fast-facts	This link connects to the Fact Fact papers published by DCDT. Each of these papers relates to a predictor of positive post-school outcomes and provides guidance for practitioners.
Transition Coalition	https://transitioncoalition.org	The Transition Coalition website includes a large number of resources. Key features include training tools (webinars and self-study training modules), a transition assessment guide, and program evaluation tool. There are many more resources as well.

The IRIS Center (Peabody College at Vanderbilt University)	https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/iris-resource-locator/?term=transition	The IRIS Center provides resources related to many areas of special education. Their transition materials feature training modules, information briefs, and video vignettes
Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment (University of Oklahoma)	http://www.ou.edu/content/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow.html	The Zarrow Center has a collection of resources that cover a variety of transition topics, including, but not limited to self-determination. The website includes free curricula that can be used directly with students as well as training materials on many topics.

Lead Program Development and Evaluation

With this area-specific knowledge, transition coordinators should be leaders in program development and evaluation to improve services. Transition coordinators work with IEP case managers to write and develop student transition plans and ensure that the entire IEP is focused on post-school goals. This might include identifying and delivering appropriate individualized transition services. When looking at more comprehensive program development, transition coordinators should review relevant research to identify specific evidence-based practices that support post-school goals (e.g., Mazzotti et al., 2016; McConnell et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009). Rowe et al. (2015) translated research-to-practice by defining predictors of positive post-school outcomes and provided examples of how these predictors can be addressed by schools.

In order to evaluate existing services, transition coordinators may consider using the Quality Indicators of Exemplary Transition Program Needs Assessment, created by Transition Coalition (n.d). In addition, it is appropriate to review data related to IDEA Indicators 1,

2, 13, and 14, each of which has a connection to post-school transition (IDEA, 2004). In addition to using existing district data, transition coordinators may consider conducting an Indicator 13 self-evaluation (e.g. the tool developed and made available by NSTTAC, 2012) in order to ensure that transition documentation is compliant.

Develop Community Relations and Facilitate Community Experiences

The opportunities transition coordinators have to develop relationships with community members may be the greatest asset to support students with disabilities achieve post-school goals. Rowe at al. (2015) expanded on the work of Test et al. (2009) by developing operational definitions and identifying program characteristics for predictors of positive post-school outcomes. Of the 16 predictors described in the study, 12 include recommendations for practice that directly benefit from the development of relationships in the community (Career Awareness, Occupational Courses, Paid Employment/Work Experience, Vocational Education, Work Study, Community Experiences, Program of Study, Self-Care/Independent Living Skills, Interagency Collaboration, Parental Involvement, Student Support, and Transition Program).

Although the ability to develop community relationships can have a significant impact on the extent to which students with disabilities find success after high school, special education teachers with regular classroom responsibilities may not have the flexibility with their schedule to make a reality (Noonan et al., 2008). In addition to supporting the development of student transition skills (e.g., employment, independent living), transition personnel may be also charged with leading a classroom that is focused on academic-related tasks. However, practitioners may struggle to fill both the role

of a transition specialist and a classroom teacher. One interviewee from Noonan et al., (2008) explained, "There is no way you can sit in a classroom and teach and coordinate and network in the community. You can't do both…" (p. 136). As such, transition coordinators should be given a schedule that allows for flexibility. Practices that may be utilized by a transition coordinator with a flexible schedule to increase community engagement include: (a) training employers and co-workers (Luecking, 2009), (b) promoting opportunities with community organizations (Carter et al., 2009), (c) developing community conversations (Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, & Pickett, 2012), and (d) arranging job shadow opportunities (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010).

Interagency Linkage

In order to prepare students and families for post-school transition, it is necessary to ensure they are connected with resources outside of the school. With the increased involvement with school-age students mandated by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA, 2014), working with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors has become increasingly important. A school-based transition coordinator can align activities so that school and VR services work in conjunction. In addition, transition coordinators can develop relationships with other community-based services, such as local Centers for Independent Living. Doing so ensures that students have first-hand knowledge of outside services that can support personal goals when school-based services have ceased.

Foster Student Self-Determination

With the current emphasis of self-determination in transition service and literature, it would be appropriate to include this in a job description for a transition coordinator. Although all teachers can implement practices to increase student self-determination, a transition coordinator, who has expertise in this area, support increased usage of these strategies. For example, although engaging in student-led IEPs may increase student self-determination (Martin et al., 2006), it is perhaps often not implemented due to a lack of time (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). Transition coordinators may be able to assist in the training of students to lead their own IEP meeting, by using pre-existing materials (e.g. Zarrow Center, n.d.) or by other means. In addition, a transition coordinator may be able to better target the self-determination needs of individuals or small groups of students by delivering a self-determination curriculum.

Conduct Transition Assessments

Transition assessment is considered the foundation of transition planning; the process allows practitioners to understand student strengths, preferences, interests, and needs that should be reflected in transition planning (Johnson, 2004). Although the federal requirements regarding transition assessment outlined by IDEA are quite broad (Neubert & Leconte, 2013), simply administering the minimal assessments to meet compliance may not provide the team with adequate information for appropriate transition planning. In order to get a more complete picture of the student, transition assessment may involve collecting relevant information related to academics, self-determination, adaptive behavior, independent living, and career and vocational data (NTACT, 2016). When a school employs a transition coordinator, the team benefits from having a

member with vast knowledge of types of assessment and can administer these tools. Transition assessment options are vast, making it more difficult for special education case managers to stay current with current trends and tools (i.e., using cloud-based assessment tools; Author, 2017).

Support Post-Secondary Education

Today's increased emphasis on post-secondary education (i.e., continued learning at a trade school or institution of higher education) for students with disabilities has been fueled by legislative initiatives (e.g., focus on college and career readiness from ESSA, 2015). As such, a list of transition coordinator roles and responsibilities must reflect this climate. Transition plans for secondary students with disabilities are required to contain a post-school goal involving training (IDEA, 2004). School counselors may be able to support students who are attending typical post-secondary education options; however, they may not be aware of opportunities for students who have disabilities. For example, certain regional colleges and universities may have programs to support students with autism spectrum disorder seeking traditional degrees (Barnhill, 2016). In addition, transition coordinators can have expertise in supporting students with disabilities who are attending post-secondary education by familiarizing them with their rights and responsibilities relating to disability support services.

Steps to Develop Transition Coordinator Position

In situations where school-based teams recognize the need for additional supports to meet the post-school needs of their students with disabilities, they may lobby for the addition of a transition coordinator to their staff. Based on our experiences in schools in the

U.S., following lists a series of steps teams may follow in order to advocate for the new position.

Step 1: Collect Relevant Data

In our current data-focused education culture, collecting information to support the need for additional transition services is an essential first step. When teams are able to use data to show a need, school administrators may be more likely to respond. For example, IDEA in the U.S. requires schools to evaluate the quality of their special education services by reporting certain data to the state (e.g., graduation rate, student drop-out rates, quality of transition components in the IEP, student post-school outcomes). These indicator data may be valuable tools in building a justification for the need for a transition coordinator. In addition to using data that has been reported to the state for review, schools may consider conducting IDEA indicator data self-evaluations to better demonstrate program needs (e.g. the tool developed and made available by NSTTAC, 2012). This information may provide insight into the extent to which schools are successful in preparing their students with disabilities for post-school transition. These may be collected and available at both the local and regional levels; having state-wide results may help to provide comparison data. Teams can use these data results to support the need for a staff member who specializes in transition to improve district performance in these areas.

Step 2: Identify Specific Needs

When a team believes the transition-related needs of their students with disabilities are not being met by a school, it is necessary to identify the specific areas in which their services are inadequate.

Teams should review relevant research to identify specific evidence-based practices that support post-school goals (e.g., Mazzotti et al., 2016; McConnell et al., 2013; Rowe et al., 2015; Test et al., 2009). Teams may also consider using a self-evaluation tool to identify gaps in service delivery. The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (n.d.) has developed an evaluation toolkit, containing a large number of evaluation tools. The Quality Indicators of Exemplary Transition Program Needs Assessment, created by Transition Coalition (n.d.) may also be a good choice for teams that may be overwhelmed by too many options. In addition to detailing the need using a special education context, teams may consider framing this need using general education legislation. For example, using language from legislation (e.g., college and career readiness) may have further resonance.

Step 3: Write a Job Description

Having a clear vision of the roles this individual will fill will support the need for the position. Information gleaned from the program evaluation process completed in the previous step can be used to help identify this list. Teams developing a job description may consider also consider the specific tasks described by Asselin et al. (1998) and the aforementioned items presented in this paper. It may also be help to review Rowe et al. (2015), who translated research-to-practice by defining predictors of positive post-school outcomes and providing examples of how this may impact service delivery. This information can be compiled to begin the development of a job description for a transition coordinator. For those who are unfamiliar with the role of a transition coordinator, this job description will help support the team's vision by providing specificity as to the responsibilities associated with the position.

Step 4: Understand the Local Landscape

Although employing a transition coordinator may be common in some geographical areas, this role may be uncommon in other regions. Teams interested in providing support for the development of a transition coordinator should reach out to other schools in the region to see if they have an individual whose primary role involves transition-related responsibilities. If regional schools have employed a transition coordinator, this may help legitimize the team's need for one as well. If schools in the region do not have transition coordinators, teams may want to expand their search to find others schools in the state that support the post-school goals of their secondary students in this manner. In addition, other schools may be will to share their job descriptions, which can help inform the team's draft document created in Step 3.

Step 5: Pitch the Idea

Ultimately, support from upper school administrators is going to be essential; without their support, the creation of a transition coordinator position is impossible. The previous four steps will have been conducted to help a team develop a clear need justification and a plan to move forward. Having these in-hand may increase the likelihood of upper administrator buy-in. As funding will likely be a primary concern for administration, teams may want to enter these discussions with a back-up plan. Consider presenting ways to rearrange current staffing so that one individual is able to focus specifically on transition. Although this would be less ideal than the creation of a transition coordinator position, teams should consider this possibility if they are unsuccessful in gaining administrative support for a new position

Conclusion

For most people, work is essential to a livelihood, a sense of worth and accomplishment, and overall life satisfaction. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of student with disabilities or low academic performance do not go on to experience steady, satisfying, or gainful employment. Schools must give more focus, in both time and resources, to preparing students for after school life. Because it is the culmination of many years of school, transition services may be a key factor in the long-term success or failure for students with disabilities. In order to ensure that students are receiving appropriate transition services, school administrators may consider employing a transition coordinator to oversee this process. Having an individual whose role is focused on providing transition-related supports has the potential to have a substantial impact on a student's ability to achieve post-school goals.

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About the author

Andrew Scheef, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Special Education at the University of Idaho. He has taught special education in public schools for eight years and is interested in conducting research and developing materials to support positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

E-mail: ascheef@uidaho.edu

Julia Mahfouz, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership program, Department of Leadership and Counseling at the University of Idaho. Mahfouz's research interests include exploring the social and emotional dynamics of educational settings and their effect on school climate.

E-mail: jmahfouz@uidaho.edu