

## Iowa's High School Super Senior School-to-Work Transition Program

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### Abstract

This article describes an innovative school-to-work transition program incorporating identified best practices. Iowa's Super Senior program serves students in the "middle range" of the disability severity spectrum during the student's senior and 5<sup>th</sup>, or "Super Senior" year. The article describes the program elements, presents outcome data, describes the funding mechanism used to sustain the program after the initial federal grant and offers recommendations for transition practice.

Iowa's High School Super Senior program has three central elements:

- **Person-Centered Career Planning**—where family members, friends and professionals come together to help a student identify their skills, interests, support needs, ideal job match action plan to reach their career goals
- **Multiple, short-term vocational experiences** to help students develop/refine their goals; and
- **Extended Internships and Ongoing Support**—during the student's "Super" senior year to develop work skills and employer/co-worker connections that will result satisfying employment that can be maintained into adulthood.

153 students entered Super Seniors 2001 through 2004-05. Of those, 85% participated in the program for at least two years. Of the 153 students served and 125 who completed two program years, 116 exited school with paid employment, with 68 (59%) obtaining full-time jobs and 50% receiving employer benefits. The 116 employed students represented 76% of all participants and 84% of those who completed two or more program years as intended under the model.

The employment outcomes for students who completed at least two years in the program were far superior to those who only participated in one year. Specifically, 84% of those who exited after two or more years were employed and only 39% of the students who chose not to complete two years in the program exited school with jobs.

In comparison to program entry, students who were employed at program exit increased their hours worked an average of 394% (6.4 hrs. to 31.4 hrs./ week), increased hourly wages by 240% (\$2.33 to \$7.93/hour) and monthly wages by 612% (\$159 to \$1,133/month).

### Introduction

National, state and local follow-up studies over the past 15 years have consistently documented that transition from school into competitive employment is an unrealized goal for many students with disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Frank & Sitlington, 1993, 2000; Horvath-Rose, Stapleton & O'Day, 2004). Documented unemployment has ranged from 27% to 66%.

It has been argued that discouraging employment outcomes are the result of failure by the educational and adult service systems to provide the array and/or intensity of services needed to ensure vocational success (National Council on Disability, 2000). These practices include:

- **Individualized career planning assistance**, where students actively plan their futures (Izzo & Lamb, 2003; Miner & Bates, 1997; Siegel et al., 2003).
- **Extensive community based work experiences**, providing

real-world settings for making meaningful career choices and learning functional skills (Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996; Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto & Newman, 1993).

- **Support services** sufficient to enable students to identify, find, learn and keep a job (Gugerty et al., 1996; National Council on Disability, 2000).
- **Linkage with community resources** to support students upon exiting the educational system (Certo et al, 2003; Luecking & Certo, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to describe a school-to-work transition program that addresses the employment challenges students with disabilities face, incorporates best transition practices and creates job opportunities for students. The pages that follow contain a description of: a) the local context; b) how the transition program works; c) outcomes to date; and d) implications for educational programs serving this population.

### Context

Grant Wood Area Education Agency (GWAEA) is an "Intermediate Educational Agency", that provides special education and support services to 33 districts in east-central Iowa. In 2000, GWAEA initiated the process of assessing post-school employment outcomes and adequacy of school-to-work transition services. As an initial step, GWAEA polled school staff, parents, and adult service professionals as to their perceptions of the efficacy of special education in transitioning students across the disability severity spectrum into adulthood. One of the inter-

esting themes that emerged was the perception that students at the most mild and most severe ends of the continuum transitioned more successfully into adulthood than those in the middle. Specifically, stakeholders perceived that students with higher academic capabilities (e.g., those served in "Resource" programs) had access to supports for post-secondary education success. Likewise it was noted that students with the most severe handicaps, who typically were served in "Self Contained" programs, had access to long-term funding for supported employment. However, students in the middle, those served in "Self-Contained with Integration" (SCI) programs, typically graduated at age 18 and either were unemployed or held a succession of part-time, low-wage dead-end jobs. It was noted that these students often did not have sufficient vocational preparation in high school and did not qualify for Vocational Rehabilitation services after graduation.

In order to substantiate this perception, GWAEA conducted a follow-up investigation into the employment status of 20 "SCI" students who had graduated over a two year period. The findings, presented in Table 1, confirmed that school-to-work transition is a significant local problem for this population and that transition services were in need of improvement. Based on these findings, and after a thorough review of the research literature on effective transition, GWAEA, several school districts

and Goodwill Industries of SE Iowa, an adult rehabilitation agency, designed the Super Senior school-to-work transition program to improve employment outcomes for SCI students. Iowa's High School Super Senior transition program began in 2001, when GWAEA and its district and Goodwill partners obtained a grant from the US Office of Special Education Programs, and continues beyond the grant with district funding. The program was titled "Super Senior" because it served students in their senior year of high school and a fifth, or "super" senior year. Under state and federal law, students with IEPs are entitled to public education through age 21. While most SCI students graduate at age 18, continued services beyond that age are permissible if IEP teams document unmet needs. Given the lack of vocational experience by most SCI students and past difficulties in obtaining employment, Super Seniors was designed as a two-year program intended to help each student make an informed career choice and obtain 20-40 hour/week jobs in the field of their choosing prior to graduation.

The three key features of the High School Super Senior transition program are:

- **Person-Centered Career Planning Assistance.** Staff works with the student, parents and teachers to help students develop an informed career choice and plan for achieving that goal.

- **Extensive work experiences.** Students explore possible careers through job shadows, short-term job try-outs and extended paid internships/apprenticeships in the community.

- **Training and support,** including coaching, travel training, social skill development, interviewing, linkages to community services, helping students find, learn and keep desired job.

What makes the Super Senior program unique are: 1) the employment outcomes achieved; 2) the collaboration with adult service agencies; 3) the use of a fifth year for intensive career preparation; and 4) the development of a funding mechanism to sustain the program in the years ahead.

## Program Features

### Staffing

GWAEA houses the Super Senior director and provides overall fiscal and program management. Transition services, however, are delivered primarily by Goodwill employment specialists and job coaches from that agency or the community. A decision was made to contract with Goodwill because community agencies offer the advantages of year-around service, employer relationships, adult service funder connections and cost effectiveness (Certo et al., 2003; Luecking & Certo, 2003). Goodwill employment specialists have at least a bachelor's degree in human services/edu-

Table 1  
Employment Status of 20 "SCI" Students

Employment Status	1999 Grads (17 mo post-HS)	2000 Grads (5 mo post-HS)
Unemployed	43%	31%
Employed Part-Time	14%	23%
Employed Full-Time	43%	46%

cation/rehabilitation and experience in employment preparation/support for individuals with special needs. Job coaches from Goodwill typically have job coach certification through the local community college. Occasionally, the program contracts with community members (e.g., retirees, current employees in a particular industry/business, parents, special educators) to provide job coaching. Typically, community coaches are selected because of their familiarity with either the occupation or the student being served.

A key element in establishing an effective transition program is staff selection. Beyond skills/experience in person-centered planning, job development and job training, Super Seniors sought staff committed to putting the student in the center of the transition process. Employment specialists were sought who would be comfortable with facilitating achievement of *student-identified*, not staff-identified, goals. In addition, staff with a flexible style and a willingness to do whatever it took to make services work for students was deemed critical to program success.

### **Who Does Iowa's Super Senior Program Serve?**

Iowa school districts offer an array of special education program models. Typically, students with less intense support needs and stronger academic skills are served primarily in general education, with in-class or resource program support. Many of these students pursue postsecondary education at two or four year institutions. At the other end of the spectrum are students with significant cognitive, behavioral and/or motor challenges whose curriculum focuses on basic/practical life skills. These students are served primarily in special classes and have life-long, intensive support needs.

Students in the middle of these two extremes have academic capabilities beyond those of students in self contained classes and below those of typical resource students. Conversely, they may have more extensive life-skill instructional needs than students in resource programs but less than those in self contained classes. This middle range group spends much of the day in what Iowa terms a "Special Class with Integration" (SCI) model, where the curriculum parallels the general academic focus. Depending upon the program and IEP goals, SCI students may or may not have had vocational training during high school.

Iowa's High School Super Senior Program was developed to serve these "middle range"/SCI program participants. The rationale behind this decision was threefold:

- The historical practice of graduation at 18, while common with this population, was not required by law and extending the graduation date could be justified by documenting unmet vocational transition goals.
- Belief that an extra year of vocational training could help students achieve vocational goals, become productive employees and avoid the employment difficulties documented above.
- Recognition that cutbacks in adult service funding and tightened eligibility rules meant limited adult service availability for many students in the middle range.

Figure 1 describes the referral guidelines teachers consider prior to recommending a student to the program. Teachers are encouraged to refer students toward the end of the junior year in high school, though students typically decide to participate early in their senior year.

The Super Seniors north and south programs have served 205 students since 2001-02. Over 59% had primary diagnoses of learning disabilities/ADD/ADHD, 14% mental retardation, 11% had behavioral disorder/emotional disturbance diagnoses, 8% had autism spectrum disorders, 3% head injury labels, 3% had "other" diagnoses and 2% did not divulge their disability label. Approximately 43% of the students had parent(s) who refused to meet with program staff to discuss their son's/daughter's vocational vision/needs, did not participate in the IEP or person-centered planning process and/or stated that they did not wish to be involved in helping create their child's vocational future. Thirty-eight percent of the students were from low income households and 29% lived on their own and/or met the state definition of having transient living situations. Almost 28% of the students had parents or siblings with disabilities and nine percent had children of their own.

Super Senior program participants seemed to fall into three subgroups. One subgroup is comprised of students who in a past era would likely have been served in an SCI or self-contained class program but whose parents successfully advocated for "full inclusion". These students spent most of their school time in general education, often developing tremendous social skills, some academic competencies and, unfortunately, very little in the way of vocational skills. Further, few connections were made with adult services as parents focused on the academic program students were to experience. As these pupils approached graduation, parents began to realize that their students had little likelihood of meeting the academic demands

Figure 1

### Super Senior Program Referral Considerations

The High School Super Senior Program is designed to transition students with disabilities who need time-limited job skills training into community employment. A student may be a candidate if he or she:

1. has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
2. has transition goals in the IEP specifying a desire for competitive employment after high school
3. is likely to need assistance in achieving a specific vocational goal.
4. is likely to need short-term (e.g., anticipated maximum of 6-12 months), community based, on-the-job training beyond high school to achieve his or her career goal.

The table below provides guidelines to assist IEP Teams in referring students to the program.

	Consider Students for Super Senior if:	Consider Alternatives to Super Senior if:
Anticipated Adult Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Referral to Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services for time limited assistance is being considered/has been recommended by the IEP team.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Referral to County/DHS long-term support is being considered/has been recommended by the IEP team.</li> </ul>
Postsecondary Education Plans/Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student does not plan to pursue postsecondary education at this time.</li> <li>•The student plans to pursue specific, job-related postsecondary courses and requires assistance beyond that which the VITAL Program offers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student plans to pursue postsecondary education program on their own or with assistance from the postsecondary school's disability services office.</li> <li>•The student meets criteria for the VITAL Program.</li> </ul>
How Student Learns Best	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student learns best through hands-on, functional experiences.</li> <li>•The student learns through modeling/demonstration and verbal directions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student learns best through discussion or academic investigation.</li> <li>•The student learns best through extensive physical guidance.</li> </ul>
General/Special Ed. Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student is enrolled in special education courses and/or modified general education classes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student is enrolled in adapted or non-adapted general education courses.</li> </ul>
Intensity of Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student performs multi-step tasks without assistance following short-term training.</li> <li>•The student does not require extended 1:1 coaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student requires ongoing assistance to perform multi-step tasks despite lengthy training.</li> <li>•The student requires extended 1:1 coaching.</li> </ul>
Length of Anticipated Training/Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student is likely to require 6-12 months of community based on-the-job training beyond high school to succeed in the job market.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student is likely to succeed in the job market without the additional 6-12 months of training.</li> <li>•The student is likely to require more than one year of training and/or support beyond high school in order to succeed in the job market.</li> </ul>
Student Interest, Commitment, & Follow-Through	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student expresses an interest in program participation and community employment as evidenced by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•6-12 months of any type of work experience prior to graduation and/or</li> <li>•follows through on commitments to meet/work with SS staff</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The student is opposed to program participation and/or community employment.</li> <li>•The student has declined work experiences.</li> <li>•The student has not followed through on commitments to meet/work with SS staff.</li> </ul>

of postsecondary education or receiving the kinds of supports in college that they had been accustomed to in high school. They recognized that their children had no clear-cut vocational goals and no guarantee of adult service funding to address this need. Faced with these uncertainties, parents saw Super Seniors as a way to transition their adolescents from school to the real world of work.

The second subgroup is comprised of those who struggled with academic tasks, performed better in courses that focus on practical life-skills, learned best through hands-on experiences and had IEP goals to work in the community upon graduation. These students often had diagnoses of mental retardation, autism-spectrum disabilities or more significant learning disabilities, had special education work experiences and may have developed an occupational goal.

The third group has been labeled as having behavior disorders or ADHD/ADD. These students tended to be quite intellectually capable in comparison to the two subgroups described above but were either noncompliant, verbally/physically aggressive and/or made impulsive behavioral choices without regard to their consequences. These students tended to mistrust adults and resist attempts to control their behavior. As a result, they often refused to work with people or programs they perceived as overly prescriptive or "in their face."

### *How Does Super Seniors Work?*

The Super Senior program consists of six primary elements, each of which addresses particular questions. These are listed in Table 2 and described in greater detail thereafter.

**ELEMENT 1: ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP/GETTING TO KNOW THE STUDENT.** Siegel et al. (2003) have emphasized the importance of transition personnel developing a "Benefactor Relationship" with the students they serve. These authors contend that trusting, long-term adult relationships are critical if students are to navigate the uncertainties of the transition period and not flounder in their attempts to obtain/maintain satisfying employment. According to Siegel, benefactors never disqualify youth from services, but rather are a dependable source of counsel and support during the transition from school to work.

Siegel's perspective on the importance of benefactors has shaped Iowa's High School Super Senior program operation. Trusting relationships with students, particularly with those who have had minimal adult guidance in their home life, do not happen overnight. Nor does it occur when staff contact is episodic. Rather, trust comes when adults invest time to get to know students, listen to their hopes, dreams and fears and let students know that they are in the driver's seat when it comes to preparing for their future.

On the basis of this philosophy, SS staff invests considerable time and effort to getting to know the student and building rapport. This takes three forms. First, staff "hangs out" with students in the school, community and home to see what and how they do, learn their likes/dislikes and get a sense of their skills. Second, staff review records and meet with teachers, students and parents to gain insight into what makes students tick and vocational paths they may wish to follow. Third, students work through career interest inventories with staff so both gain insight into occupations that might be

explored. While several inventories are available (e.g., The Holland Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1994); Choicemaker (Martin & Marshall, 1995)) and have occasionally been used, the primary tool has been the Your Employment Selection (YES) career interest/exploration system (Morgan, 2003; TRI-SPED, 2000). This reading-free, CD-ROM-based inventory was designed, to help students identify possible career paths that match student-preferred characteristics (e.g., work alone/with others, sit down/standing work, heavy/light work, academic/physical labor, indoor/outdoor work etc.). YES shows short, narrated video clips of over 120 jobs, with students selecting those of greatest interest. By observing what students select and probing reasons for their choices, staff begins to form a picture of who the student is and what motivates them.

### **ELEMENT 2: PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLANNING.**

Once rapport has been established and staff gets to know the student, together they arrange a person-centered career planning (PCCP) session. This meeting is hosted by the student, facilitated by the staff member and attended by the people the student feels can help plan for a satisfying career after high school. Generally, the meeting is attended by the student's teacher, other IEP team members, family and friends. Flipcharts are used to display the key points raised in the PCCP meeting. For students uncomfortable with this more formal approach, however, staff may summarize the proceedings on a notepad. The first PCCP meeting generally lasts from 1-1.5 hours and follows a prescribed process:

- *Identifying Ground Rules.* The facilitator starts with ground rules that will ensure that

Table 2  
 Primary Elements of the Super Senior Program

Super Senior Program Element	Question Addressed by Element
<b>Establishing a Relationship with &amp; Getting to Know the Student:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Record Review</li> <li>•Teacher, Parent, Student Interviews</li> <li>•School-Community Observations</li> <li>•Vocational Interest Inventory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What are the student’s career dreams, general skill levels, and areas in need of training/support?</li> </ul>
<b>Person-Centered Career Planning Sessions:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Team of student’s choosing</li> <li>•Review of work history, skills, interests</li> <li>•Identify ideal job elements &amp; occupations to investigate</li> <li>•Identify barriers to an ideal job</li> <li>•Next steps &amp; action planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What career options should be explored?</li> <li>•What are the “must-have” and “must-avoid” elements of student’s “ideal” job?</li> <li>•What is our plan for helping students obtain their “ideal job”?</li> <li>•Who can help implement the plan?</li> </ul>
<b>Sr Yr Community Work Expectations:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Job Shadows</li> <li>•Short-term work experiences/try-outs</li> <li>•Six-eight week work experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What career area(s) is (are) of greatest interest to student?</li> <li>•What are student’s support/training needs?</li> </ul>
<b>Fifth/Super Senior Yr Internships:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•4-12 week paid internships</li> <li>•Coaching/co-worker support development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Internship meets student career goals?</li> <li>•Is student qualified for such employment or is another internship warranted?</li> <li>•Will employer hire or provide a referral?</li> </ul>
<b>Additional Skill Training/Support</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Community College coursework</li> <li>•Resume/application/interview skill training</li> <li>•Transportation training</li> <li>•Behavioral/social skill teaching/support</li> <li>•Community service linkage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What related skills/services does the student need for employment success?</li> </ul>
<b>Paid Employment and Program Exit</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Convert internship into paid employment or develop job that matches career goal</li> <li>•Provide training/support until student employed for 60 days</li> </ul>	<p>Should the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•exit special education and the SS program?</li> <li>•continue to receive SS support on this job?</li> <li>•exit to adult system long-term supports?</li> </ul>

the student drives the career-planning process. These rules include: 1) The student speaks first; 2) Everyone contributes; 3) All must use plain words; 4) No blocking statements are allowed; and 5) All must promise only what they can deliver and deliver on all promises.

- *Reviewing Student Work History.* Starting the meeting here gives participants something concrete to discuss and allows all to see what the

individual’s work preferences and dislikes might be. The facilitator asks the student to describe their formal /informal work experiences and team members may comment on what the student liked/disliked about each experience.

- *Identifying Student Strengths/Talents.* PCCP is intended to be a positive, empowering experience. Discussing student strengths underscores this approach by painting a pic-

ture of the gifts the student brings to the table. These gifts can range from specific work skills (“he’s great at fixing things”) to the so-called “soft skills” such as friendly, outgoing, hard working etc.

- *Identifying an “Ideal Job Match” or Areas to Explore Further.* Super Senior students generally have fallen into two groups: 1) those who have relatively well defined career goals; or 2) those who do not have defined career goals. In

the case of the former, the PCCP team tries to help the student articulate his/her career vision into an ideal job match description. This description will often include both “must-have” features of a job and work elements that should be avoided. Box 1 illustrates a recently-developed job match statement.

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**Box 1. Jason’s perfect job is one that allows him to work primarily outside and will keep him physically active. Working with nature/animals is a strong interest, with week-days and 1st shift hours preferred. An ideal job will surround Jason with co-workers but will not require working with customers or dealing with money. He would like to work 40 hours per week and make at least \$8.50 per hour.**

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In many cases, students have such limited work experience that they are unable to make informed career choices. In those instances, the PCCP team helps them craft a statement similar to the one in Box 2 about the two or three areas that might be explored in order to identify elements of an ideal job.

- *Identify Challenges and Strategies for Addressing Them.* This, in a sense, is the “reality” step in the PCCP process. Here the team identifies the obstacles that might prevent the student from an ideal job. Most students with disabili-

ties face challenges. To ignore them is to paint an unrealistic picture of what lies ahead. The key is to identify potential barriers and then to use the collective wisdom of the team to identify steps that might be taken to overcome them. Common challenges include transportation, dealing with social situations, limited employment opportunities in the student’s desired field or community, communication/behavioral/physical disabilities that may require accommodations, and job seeking. For each step, a list of possible solutions is generated. The student is then asked to rank the solutions from most to least preferred - again underscoring the team’s commitment to put the student in the driver’s seat. Box 3 illustrates a recent challenge and solution list.

- *Developing an Action Plan.* One of the strengths of the PCCP process is that the people who form the team can contribute significantly to making the ideal job situation a reality. The important contributions they can make range from identifying and opening doors to businesses that might match student interests, providing job shadows/short-term job tryout opportunities, linking students to community resources such as Vocational Rehabilitation or Social Security, providing transportation assistance/train-

ing and/or solving the transportation or other identified obstacles. The facilitator and team set deadlines for the action steps, with individuals assuming responsibilities responsible for reporting the results to the facilitator and the team.

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**Box 2. Mallory’s perfect job is one that will allow her the extra hands on training she will need to fully understand her duties. The job will be clearly laid out and will be highly structured. Her co-workers will be understanding and friendly. One person will be Mallory’s go-to person when she becomes frustrated on the job. Her ideal job must be interesting (a doctor’s office, small shop, or library are options), part time, and must pay at least \$7.00+/hour.**

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- *Follow-up.* Project staff and students follow-up on the PCCP meeting in several ways. A “Career Planning Workbook” is created for each student from notes of the meeting. Staff refer to this workbook as the action plan unfolds and update it as the student begins to refine his/her career plan. Students and staff also develop a resume from the information gathered at the PCCP meeting. Follow-up PCCP team meetings may be held periodically to review progress, identify solutions to challenges that have arisen and/or to note

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**Box 3. Challenge: The student lives in the city but wishes to work on a farm. He does not drive and there is no public transportation to outlying farming areas.**

***Potential Solutions Generated:***

- **Learn to drive**
  - **Family member or co-worker transports student**
  - **Take bus to edge of town, ride bike from there to farm**
  - **Explore farm-related jobs in the city (e.g., feed dealer, tractor supply store)**
  - **Move to farming community**
-

any changes in the student's career direction based on their community-based experiences. Finally, the PCCP information is used to develop the student's IEP, with staff assisting teachers in this process.

#### ELEMENT 3: EXPLORING CAREERS THROUGH SENIOR YEAR COMMUNITY-BASED CAREER EXPLORATION.

Senior year students can develop or refine their career goals through two types of work experiences. Job Shadows are 1-3 hour sessions where students have the opportunity to observe an employee, ask questions about the work, and typically perform elements of the job. Short-term Job Tryouts are similar to Job Shadows except that they might occur over several days or weeks and afford the student more hands-on experience.

After each shadow or tryout, students are debriefed to determine what they liked/disliked and whether the situation matched what their interest inventory and PCCP meeting identified as important elements of an ideal job. Students share the lessons learned with staff and their PCCP team and refine their career goals based on their own reactions and the input of team members. It is hoped that students narrow their career choices down to one or two options by the end of senior year, though in about 15% of the cases, this extends into the 5th year. Once they have a defined goal, students proceed to the next step in the process.

#### ELEMENT 4: DEVELOPING VOCATIONAL SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE THROUGH 5TH YEAR INTERNSHIPS.

Paid internships are 4-to-12 week, hands-on experiences where students acquire specific skills and contribute to the business through guidance from program staff and company personnel. Internship stipends are built into the program budget,

both during grant funding and now with districts paying for the service. Internships offer four advantages: a) they enable the student to "test drive" a particular occupation and make an informed career choice; b) they provide a real-life opportunity to assess and develop skills needed to succeed in this line of work; and c) they provide a resume-building experience and employer reference; and d) they offer employers a low-risk way to determine whether a student might become a valuable addition to their workforce.

Internships are developed using the following process:

- *Initial Employer Contact.* Employers generally are approached by project staff, often through referrals from current/past business partners, staff colleagues or PCCP team members. At the initial meeting, staff shares information about the program, asks questions to learn of employment needs in the firm, and describes the student who is seeking the internship.
- *Interview.* If the employer shows interest, a tour of the facility and a traditional or a "working" interview is arranged to allow students and employers to meet.
- *Negotiation.* Staff then confers with the student and employer to determine mutual interest in an internship. If so, staff negotiates hours, duties, wages, and other particulars of the internship and seeks employer commitment to pay the student. In cases where employers are unable or unwilling to pay, a time-limited wage subsidy is offered.
- *Job Analysis/Placement/Job Coaching.* Staff task analyze the components of the job, assess student performance on identified tasks, and provide job coaching during the

initial days or week(s) of the internship. A behavioral training regiment of verbal cueing, modeling/demonstration and, if needed, picture/written prompts and physical guidance, is used to teach skills.

- *Developing Natural Supports.* As part of the internship, students are linked with a "co-worker advocate" who will share the responsibility for job training and workplace integration with project staff. Project staff fades their assistance in several ways, including modeling coaching strategies for co-worker advocates, developing checklists for students to use and gradually reducing their presence on the job site while staying in contact with employers to monitor performance. The typical Super Senior student requires one to five weeks of coaching, though students have required as little as one day and as much as six months.
- *Evaluating the Internship.* Staff, student and employer meet at the end of the internship to evaluate the student's job and job-related skills, co-worker relationships, and employer perceptions of the support provided by the program. Employers complete an evaluation survey (Figure 2) and the meeting addresses employer and student perception of the experience.

#### ELEMENT 5: ADDITIONAL/CUSTOMIZED SUPPORTS.

Super Senior staff provides additional supports to students and/or link them with community resources that offer services. Examples include:

- *Community College access/learning supports.* Students who wish to take a community college course specifically related to their career may do so, with the school district paying tuition and



Figure 2  
Internship Evaluation Form

**Dear Employer:** The mission of the Super Senior Program is to prepare today's youth for tomorrow's workforce. Companies like your's help us, our students, and themselves by providing internships. We need your honest feedback on how well the intern named below performed for you, and your satisfaction with the support received from our program. Thank you in advance for taking the time to let us know how we can improve Super Seniors and meet the needs of area employers.

Intern's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Business Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Business Contact Person \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

**Your Intern's Performance:**

- |  | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
|  | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |
| 1. Your intern's <b>quality of work</b> was acceptable/appropriate for his/her assigned tasks. |                       |              |                 |                          |
| 2. Your intern's <b>quantity of work</b> was acceptable and kept up with the company's needs.  | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |
| 3. Your intern was able to <b>follow directions and worked well with his/her supervisor.</b>   | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |
| 4. Your intern was able to <b>get along with co-workers.</b>                                   | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |
| 5. Your intern's <b>grooming/appearance</b> was appropriate /acceptable for the workplace.     | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |
| 6. Your intern was <b>on time</b> for work and demonstrated <b>good attendance.</b>            | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |
| 7. You would <b>recommend</b> your intern for a position in your industry.                     | 4                     | 3            | 2               | 1                        |

**Our Program's Performance:**

- |  | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> |   |   |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|---|---|
|  | 4                     | 3            | 2 | 1 |
| 1. Super Seniors found <b>an intern who could meet your company's needs.</b>   |                       |              |   |   |
| 2. Super Senior staff <b>prepared your staff</b> to work effectively with your intern.   | 4                     | 3            | 2 | 1 |
| 3. Super Senior staff <b>responded quickly and effectively</b> to your questions or concerns.  | 4                     | 3            | 2 | 1 |
| 4. If we could do one thing to improve the Super Seniors internship process, what would that be?   |                       |              |   |   |
| 5. Would you be willing to: <b>(check all that apply)</b>  |                       |              |   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Take on another intern? <input type="checkbox"/> Give testimonial about our services? <input type="checkbox"/> Contact other businesses about our program? <input type="checkbox"/> Write a reference letter for the student? |                       |              |   |   |

**Additional Comments:**

Evaluator's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Super Senior staff supporting students. For example, one young man took a masonry course and staff provided in-class tutoring/coaching. At the end of the semester, the head of the masonry program expressed reservations about whether the student could perform quickly enough to meet employer expectations. The student's instructor, however, felt he could succeed if given more one-on-one assistance than he could provide in the context of the 20-student class. As a result, we contracted for the instructor to work with the student during the winter break. By the end of the break, the student had improved his productivity to acceptable levels, allowing him to complete the program and ultimately enter the masonry field.

- *Interviewing/Resume Writing/Job Application Training.* Staff assists students in developing and updating their resumes and in completing job applications. With regard to the latter, students complete and keep a "Little Red Book" with key information that can be used whenever applying for a job. Staff will conduct mock interviews and will recruit current and prospective employers to give students a more realistic interview experience.
- *Transportation Assistance.* Staff transports students, teaches bus riding skills, preps students for driver exams, and/or will help students make transportation arrangements.
- *Behavioral/Social Skill Teaching/Support.* These services range from behavioral contracts to role playing social situations to cognitive strategies such as self-talk, to 1:1 counseling.
- *Linkage with Community Agencies.* Staff will connect stu-

dents with Vocational Rehabilitation, County MH/DD, Social Security Administration, subsidized housing, and substance abuse/mental health counseling service agencies as needed. Assistance ranges from providing contact information to completing applications, to accompanying students to appointments.

These services are delivered to students primarily in community settings, particularly in the fifth year when students are not typically in the high school building. Staff time devoted to students varies on the basis of their 4th/5th year status and intensity of needs. Staff may average as little as 1 hour or less with a student early in the senior year. This picks up considerably toward the end of the senior and into the super senior year, where more than 10-20 hours/week might be required when an internship is initiated, fading to 1-4 hours per week as students progress.

#### ELEMENT 6: OBTAINING PAID, INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT IN A PREFERRED OCCUPATION

The purpose of the Super Senior program is to help students obtain the job of their dreams prior to exiting the school system. Once students have had success in their internships and are able to articulate their career choice, project staff attempts to create that job opportunity. This happens in one of two ways. In approximately 80% of cases, employers with interns will extend an employment offer to their intern. In essence, the internship has given the business an opportunity to see the student's talents firsthand. Satisfied employers often hire individuals who have contributed to their business. In cases where an internship either does not lead to a job offer or the student does not accept the offer, however, project staff, the stu-

dent, and PCCP team will develop that "ideal job." This process is similar to that used to develop internships, with the major difference being that an actual job is being sought, not a time-limited or subsidized internship.

## Outcomes

Evaluation is an ongoing part of Iowa's Super Senior program. This section summarizes data documenting program growth, student participation, and education/employment outcomes in the first five years of operation (2001/02-2005/06).

#### STUDENT REFERRALS

One standard for measuring program vitality is growth over time. Iowa's High School Super Senior program meets this standard exceedingly well, growing from 19 student referrals in 2001-02 to over 60 in 2005-06.

#### NUMBER OF STUDENTS COMPLETING PROGRAM.

153 students entered Super Seniors prior to the 2005-06 school year, thus having had the opportunity for two years of participation. Of those, 125 or 82% participated in the program for at least two years. Most of the students who exited early did so at their own choosing. Some, however, were found to require more intensive supports and were referred to adult services funded by vocational rehabilitation and/or county human service systems. Twelve percent of the 153 students continued to participate into a third program year.

#### STUDENT PARTICIPATION.

Since 2001, students have engaged in: 1,000 Job Shadows/Tryouts, 230 Internships, 289 job placements. Student participation increased in each of the five years of the program.

#### EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES.

The overall employment rate of the 153 students who had the opportunity for two years of program participation was 76%

**Table 3**  
**Student Occupations**

Occupation	Percent
Food Services	21.7
Clerk	11.7
Sales	10.0
Child/Day Care	10.0
Janitorial	10.0
Machinery Operator/Factory Worker	8.3
Computer Repair	6.7
Telemarketer	6.7
Construction Worker	5.0
Medical Services	3.3
Automotive Services	3.3
Security Guard	1.7
Dog Groomer	1.7
Totals:	100%

(116). However, substantial employment outcome differences were noted between students who completed at least two years in the program and those who only participated in their senior year. Specifically, 84% of those served in two or more years exited with jobs (105 of 125). In contrast, only 39% (11 of 28) of the students who chose not to complete two years in the program were employed at program exit.

Of the 116 students who exited school with paid employment, 68 (59%) held full-time jobs and 50% received employer benefits. In comparison to program entry, students who were employed at program exit increased their hours worked an average of 394% (6.4 hrs. to 31.4 hrs./ week), increased hourly wages by 240% (\$2.33 to \$7.93/hour) and monthly wages by 612% (\$159 to \$1,133/month).

As indicated in Table 3, students have obtained employment in a robust array of occupations. Most jobs required minimal formal education beyond high school, though several (e.g., childcare, medical services, auto services) required special certifications achieved through community college or employer-offered training,

### ***Funding High School Super Seniors Beyond the Start-up Grant***

As stated above, Iowa's High School Super Senior was initially funded by a grant from the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. Within the first year of operation, the project director formed a committee to develop a plan to sustain the program. This committee, consisting of administrators from local districts, Grant Wood AEA, Goodwill Industries, the University of Iowa Center for Disabilities and Development, Kirkwood Community College and Iowa's Department of Education, along with teachers, parents and staff met for almost two years to put a plan into place. The main elements of the plan are described below.

- ***Program Management/Staffing Configuration.*** The committee examined several program arrangements, from continuing the AEA/adult service provider subcontract approach to districts each operating the program with school staff. The decision was made to maintain the current approach of having the AEA serve as the lead agency and

sub-contracting with adult service providers for staff.

- ***Billing Districts for Services.*** The committee studied the feasibility of two options for charging districts for Super Senior services. The first option was to bill for both senior year and 5<sup>th</sup> year services the second option was to continue to serve students in the senior and 5<sup>th</sup> years, but only invoice districts based on 5<sup>th</sup> year participants. This latter option was selected because funding for 4<sup>th</sup> year students was tied up with the teachers, transportation and other services the student receives, leaving little flexibility. Fifth year pupils, however, would not typically attend the high school or require services from school personnel, thus freeing dollars for Super Senior services.
- ***Establishing a Unit of Service and Projecting Cost to Districts.*** Iowa students receiving special education services are assigned a "weight" based on a formula that takes into account their level of service need and program model. The average cost of educating a student in general education is then multiplied by this weighting figure to derive a reimbursement rate to the district serving that student. Weighting figure are 1.72 for Level 1-designated students, 2.21 for Level 2 students and 3.76 for Level 3. A study conducted over a 12 month period confirmed that Super Senior staff time did increase based on the student's weighting (1.65 & 3.3 for Levels 2 & 3 respectively). In order to determine financial viability of billing for 5<sup>th</sup> year students, we then projected next year's cost and number of 5<sup>th</sup> year student participants. The findings, presented in Table 4, docu-

mented that the program would be financially viable, with projected billing rate unlikely to exceed the per-pupil funding districts receive.

### Discussion and Recommendations

This article provides an overview of Iowa's High School Super Senior program for preparing students with disabilities for satisfying careers. Program services were described and data presented regarding the program's impact on students in the "middle range" of the disability spectrum. The results show that 84% of the students who completed two or more years with the Super Senior program (125 students) exited with a job and 76% of all program participants (153 students), which includes those with less than two years participation, exited employed.

As indicated on page 1, the need data that led to the development of this program showed that up to 43% of SCI students who graduated at 18 years of age without a Super Senior program were unemployed. The Super Senior outcome data, including percentage employed, hours worked, hourly wages and monthly wages suggest that the program has had a substantial impact on students. These results, though preliminary, suggest that an intervention that spans a student's senior and 5<sup>th</sup> year and combines person-centered career planning with progressively in-depth community experiences, can produce im-

proved employment outcomes for this population.

Nationally, cutbacks in human service funding have resulted in more stringent adult service eligibility and less service for those fortunate enough to qualify for vocational supports. An added significance of Iowa's High School Super Senior program is that the funding mechanism that has resulted in its sustainability offers a way to add resources to the system. In an era of budget cutting, this opportunity to increase transition services without reducing service elsewhere should be seized.

Clearly, research to test the program's effectiveness would seem warranted. Questions that might be investigated include: a) whether or to what extent would randomized, controlled scientific investigations yield similar findings. b) would the program produce similar results in larger urban areas and more diverse settings; c) do Super Senior students maintain employment 6-12 months following program exit; and d) the applicability of the Super Senior model to students with more or less severe disabilities. Answers to these and other questions will add to our understanding of effective school-to-work transition practices with students who have disabilities.

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Table 4  
Project Funding

Weighting Level	Amount			Projected Per Pupil Billing	Projected #	
	Districts Generate	Single Unit Cost	Unit Multiplier		Students Per Level	Projected SS Revenue
Level 1	\$8,820		1.0	\$4,630	28	\$129,633
Level 2	\$11,333	\$4,630	1.65	\$7,639	33	\$252,091
Level 3	\$19,281		3.3	\$15,278	7	\$106,948
Totals					68	\$488,672

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