

People & Families

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JOSIE WEISS AND HER SON MATT
Photo by Rebecca Shavulsky

Transition Services and Support for Students with Autism



Transition for Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools

by Brenda Considine



18 year old Akeem and his job coach, Jonathan

For more than two decades, the U.S. Department of Education has stressed the importance of successful transition from school to adult life for students with developmental and other disabilities. The federal government has helped states improve transition planning and services through public policy, systems change, and fiscal support for demonstration projects and research.

In 1997, the transition of students with disabilities from school to adult life—post-secondary programs, work, and independence—became a cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When Congress amended the Act that year, it intensified and formalized steps schools must take to prepare students with disabilities for meaningful outcomes, including jobs and full community participation.

While outcomes for graduates with disabilities have improved since then, students from minority backgrounds and urban schools continue to face unique challenges and lag behind other groups.

The National Institute on Urban School Improvement is a voluntary network of special and general education leaders committed to improving outcomes for youth from urban areas. They report that minority students, particularly African-American students, are more likely than other students to drop out of school.

Nationwide, 36% of students with disabilities from urban areas drop out, compared to 24% of students with disabilities from suburban areas, and 12% of the general

education student population. In addition, urban students face more risk factors associated with school failure, including family structure, parent education and household income.

The Institute reports that 10-25% of urban students with disabilities live in two parent households; 22% of their parents had not completed high school; and 47% live in a household with an annual income of less than \$12,000.

For more than 35 years, Sol Heckelman, Ph.D., has worked in special education in many of New Jersey's larger school districts including Trenton, Englewood, Pemberton, South Plainfield and Long Branch. A retired school psychologist, he serves on the State Special Education Advisory Council, the Council on Developmental Disabilities' Education Task Force and is active with the New Jersey School Psychologists' Association.

Heckelman believes that the risk factors associated with urban special education do not simply add to challenges, they multiply them exponentially. Aside from issues of poverty and parental engagement, Heckelman said that the students themselves are simply not primed to think ahead about the future.

"If you are moving all the time, or not getting sleep, adequate nutrition or medical care, or you are worried about what is happening on the street, you are not free to contemplate the future. You cannot really engage in the transition planning process," he said.

"If your moorings are not solid, it can be very, very frightening to think about transition," added Heckelman. "For many of our kids, school is the most stable part of their lives."

With additional risk factors and disadvantages, what can schools do to support these students through school and into adult life?

"Transition planning for urban students with disabilities is not that different than transition planning for any student," said Judy Shanley, Ph.D., Senior Training and Technical Assistance Associate with the Urban Special Education Collaborative (EDC), a project of the Massachusetts

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—Dr. Geri Gibbia

based non-profit, Education Development Center.

"In order to plan for the future, every student needs to start with an understanding of his or her own interests, preferences, and learning style."

Shanley, who worked for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, underscored the need for well-trained, credentialed professionals in schools. "You need people leading transition planning who have a set of core competencies and who know the strategies and evidence-based practices that work."

Part of Shanley's work at EDC is to foster interagency collaboration. "One of the hardest things to do is creating systemic ways of communicating across sectors, but it is vital that schools bring people from different agencies and perspectives together to do resource mapping. It lets them see in a concrete way what is available to them and how to access it."

Shanley stressed the need for on-going communication with parents in order to engage them in the transition planning process. She said that schools need to consider language issues and use a variety of accessible communication tools including newsletters, flyers, announcements, letters, e-mail.

"Communication is not one size fits all, or a one-shot deal. It must be varied, on-going and repeated," she said, adding that it can be helpful to use "trusted intermediaries," such as provider agencies, parent groups and community organizations to share information with families.

Like Heckelman, Shanley believes that transition of students with disabilities in urban schools creates obstacles. "Schools need to offer comprehensive wrap around services for students

to in order to mitigate the effects some of the challenges in their lives,” she said.

“And they need role models. Kids need to see successful people who grew up like they did. They need to meet and get to know professionals and leaders who came from their neighborhoods who can show them the potential of what can be.”

Elyse Pepose, M.A., is a transition consultant who recently retired after 34 years in urban special education, working in public schools in Newark, Lakewood and most recently, Belleville, New Jersey. She agrees that students with disabilities in urban schools need to see the possibilities for their own potential.

“Part of our task is to help these students, as well as their parents and the community, see that their goals are attainable and that once they leave the protective halls of high school, they can make something of themselves,” she said. “They need to be exposed to different types of work and encouraged to find and develop their talents.”

In order to do that, Pepose worked closely with local businesses in and around Belleville to find and develop work opportunities. Networking with Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, she found locations where her students, the majority of whom were classified as having learning disabilities, could explore different kinds of jobs.

“We have to be teachers, advocates and pseudo-parents to help these students find what they like to do and express their talents,” she said. “It is a different path for every student.”

Pepose said that while that most students with significant disabilities were placed out of district, she did provide supports for some students, such as those on the autism spectrum, who did not go to job sites.

“The lower functioning students could go to the library, or would work with the custodian, or have a one-on-one job coach,” she said. “But no matter where they were, we made sure that they were doing real work that needed to be done.”

Dr. Geri Gibbia, co-founder and executive director of the Phoenix Center in Nutley, New



“Before they leave us, students develop a resume with real work experience.”

—Dr. Geraldine Gibbia, executive director,
The Phoenix Center of Nutley, NJ

Jersey, knows first-hand about the challenges associated with transition for urban youth with significant disabilities. The students she serves at her state-approved private school have moderate to severe autism, medical, physical and sensory disabilities and behavioral challenges. Many are from Newark, Passaic, Clifton, East Orange, Irvington, Paterson and other large urban school districts.

“Many people take one look at our students and think that they cannot work, but we know they can,” said Gibbia. “We help families access the system to get these young adults the supports that they need to be in the community.”

The Phoenix Center was the first private school in the state to receive approval for its supported employment program. As part of their transition IEP, students at Phoenix are engaged in volunteer or paid integrated employment. Every student receives community-based instruction and a comprehensive vocational assessment.

“Before students age out, staff go with parents to look at adult programs to help them find a good fit in their own community. Before they leave us, students develop a resume with real work experience,” she added.

“Some students graduate with a job, but we have to find it, train the student and try to build natural supports. It takes a lot of phone calls and advocacy,” said Gibbia.

Gibbia began her career in special education more than 35 years ago as a speech pathologist at Bergen County Special Services School District. She believes that her students have many of the same dreams and aspirations as other students with disabilities, but fewer supports and resources.

“There are challenges for all students, but for urban students with very significant disabilities the challenges are magnified and more layered,” she said.

“We have to address multiple issues—language barriers, financial barriers, transportation issues, immigration and documentation issues, the court systems, DYFS, and a range of cultural views on disability—any one of these can make transition harder. We have to deal with all of it,” she said.

Gibbia noted that many of the students she serves are living with one parent, a foster parent, an older sibling, grandparents or aunts and uncles. In some situations, who is in authority to make decisions on behalf of the student is unclear.

“Sometimes, we develop job supports in one community, only to have the student move in with another relative in a different town,” added Gibbia. “It is hard to plan for the future when you don’t know where the student will live the next day.”

Lauren Protomastro is the Coordinator for Transition Services at The Phoenix Center. She said it can be hard to engage parents, guardians and caregivers to the degree needed to work the adult service system.

“The Division of Developmental Disabilities’ (DDD) self-directed system is great in principle but so many of our parents don’t have the time, money or skills to manage services, so they cannot take full advantage of the system,” she said.

Protomastro described how most of the caregivers of her students have full time jobs that offer little flexibility, but the types of activities their adult children with disabilities can arrange are typically a patchwork of part time work and/or volunteer experiences.

“Our students might have a job when they graduate, but they cannot keep it due to family economics,” she said. As a result, they may end up in a more sheltered, restrictive program.

“When a parent has to choose between a traditional, center-based day—one that operates five days a week on a regular schedule—or a part time job a few hours a day, or a few days a week with a job coach, they will often opt for the center-based program because it allows them to keep their own jobs. They simply cannot afford to stay home so their child can work part time,” she noted.

Success Among the Challenges

As part of his transition plan, 18-year old Newark resident, Akeem, is working at Rico Food, a Paterson-based Company that manufactures and distributes Caribbean foods and spices. For the last 6 months, Akeem has worked in the accounts payable department filing receipts and preparing filing cabinets using a label maker.

“Akeem can be very shy at first, but then his personality really shines with his warm smile and sense of humor,” said Jonathan Andolino, an employment specialist at Phoenix Center who works with Akeem. “He enjoys the solitude of his job, but we are working to make him more comfortable talking to his boss and co-workers in order to help build natural supports on the job.”

When Akeem first started the job at Rico Foods, Andolino created a ‘letter line’ for him so that he could alphabetize things more quickly and independently. Now, he has mastered the job, so he no longer needs it.

Andolino said that Akeem works independently most of the time, but will ask questions and seek guidance. “Akeem is able to identify and fix his own errors and is proud of the work he does,” added Andolino.

“Akeem is one of many success stories,” said Gibbia. “But each student’s story is so different. Transition planning has to be based on family values, priorities, and culture, and focused on each individual student’s interests, preferences and needs,” she added. “It is like a puzzle, and can be very challenging to get all of the pieces to fit, but when it works, it can make all the difference.” **P&F**