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Abstract

Transition from school into the world of work can be difficult. Literacy, communication, and technology skills must be well-developed to enter and remain on the job. Strong school preparation opportunities can help ease the transition. In 1994, as part of the national movement for educational reform, Congress passed the *School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA)*, which recognized the importance of including every student from kindergarten through grade 12, with special focus on the needs of women, minorities, and disabled individuals. The Act, linked with the Individuals with *Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, requires that educational programs develop school to work (STW) transition plans for all disabled students 16 years of age and older. STWOA stipulates that, in addition to work, trade school or college placement is also considered employment. Transition plans can ensure better preparation for both college and work. Alumni surveys from Gallaudet University and Rochester Institute of Technology suggest that salaries and career opportunities for Deaf individuals are correlated with continued education. Transition opportunities are state and locally based and are seen as incorporated within school, family, business, and community partnerships. These partnerships, along with effective staff development for teachers, professionals, industry participants, and motivated students promote successful transitions into the world of work. Transition teams will be required to work with the deaf and hard-of-hearing student toward achieving appropriate levels of marketable skills to enter tomorrow's workplace.

Introduction

Opportunities for career preparation can make the transition from school to work easier for high school students. In America, the success of the School-to-Work (STW) program depends upon national and state funding with local business and community opportunities. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing can benefit from STW programs if appropriate support services are in place to smooth the transition between school and the workplace. Work, by definition, includes college and trade school placement. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students who are graduating today are entering work or continuing school and can benefit from STW programs.

In this article, college and work statistics are presented that emphasize the need for a national framework for STW in America. Examples of opportunities available for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in a typical community are briefly described. Characteristics of effective programs that focus on deaf and hard-of-hearing students are

suggested, and areas of needed improvement in the STW program for deaf and hard-of-hearing students are suggested in the conclusion.

STW: A Working System

The STW program is a system that provides career awareness, career exploration and career preparation. This system can coordinate STW programs for an entire state or be found only in one school district, that coordinates activities for its students from elementary through high school. STW partnerships consist of collaborative efforts among schools, employers, and the community, to provide a variety of work and school opportunities, up-to-date resources, and hands-on experiences. Area businesses participate in a variety of capacities, ranging from elementary school mentorships to high school/community college collaborative programs.

The STW initiative has revived an interest in educational reform. These reform efforts were supported by the *School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA)* of 1994, federal legislation supported by the United States Departments of Education and Labor. STW has become part of a broader, national movement for educational reform, which also includes *Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the National Skill Standards Act* of 1994. The STWOA allows access to funds for developing and establishing statewide STW Opportunity Systems.

STW is for students of all ages. Activities begin in kindergarten and continue through 12th grade. STWOA makes specific references to students with disabilities, individuals from minority groups, and women. It recognizes the importance of including these individuals in STW initiatives by increasing opportunities for them to prepare for careers that are not traditional for their race, gender, or disability.

The STW Outreach Project was established when STWOA became law and was to continue for approximately three years. It offered support and suggestions nationally and statewide for effective integration of STW activities into the regular curriculum. School and work based learning was coordinated with connecting STW activities. STW became an umbrella term for many activities, experiences, and opportunities that prepare students for the world of work. Some activities include Youth Apprenticeships, Mentorships, Internships, Job Shadowing, Career Exploration, and Integration of Academic and Vocational curriculum. School-based instruction and experiences focused on academic and occupational skills standards. Work-based instruction focused on the workplace experience, structured training, mentoring, and apprenticeships at various job sites. Connecting

activities are interventions that build and maintain bridges between school, work, and other adult environments.

The goal of the STW Outreach Project was to provide support for new and recently established STW programs. The Outreach Project identified and documented exemplary models, practices, and strategies used in STW activities that included students with disabilities. Many programs were recognized through a twice-a-year nominating process. Programs were encouraged to adopt and replicate exemplary STW models, practices, and strategies in general and special education. The Outreach Project provided technical assistance to organizations and schools that desired to implement these exemplary models or improve their already established STW practices. Also, the STW Outreach Project's goal was to share information and promote inclusion of youth with disabilities in as many STW activities as possible. The website for obtaining access to this shared information is www.stw.ed.gov.

STW: Working for Students

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) helped to promote academic and career development of students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are required by this Act for all students with a disability receiving services in school. An IEP outlines all the academic services a student will receive, including the transition plan for students 16 years of age and older. Transition plans detail specific programs, activities, and services that address the obstacles that youth with disabilities face as they make the transition to work.

America's STW systems incorporate principles of flexibility, high academic and skill standards, and wider opportunities for all students. They are designed to provide equal benefit to a variety of youth with special needs, including students with disabilities, school dropouts, and academically talented learners. This is a challenge for all states, and changes occur slowly. States have program reports and site visits from Federal representatives to ensure appropriate programs are in place.

As part of the STW initiatives, all students choose a career major by the start of the 11th grade. The system builds incrementally, becoming richer and more challenging as the student matures. Linkages occur with post-secondary education with two-year institutions with dual enrollment and credit for attending classes at community colleges. However, linkages with four-year colleges are just beginning. Perhaps this is because few teacher preparation institutions include STW concepts in their programs of study.

Early in the STW process, field trips and career fairs introduce students to the world of work. In junior high or middle schools, the focus shifts to career exploration, working with guidance counselors and teachers to focus on career options, job shadowing and mentoring experiences. Apprenticeships and internships integrate STW in high school. School districts work with post-secondary institutions to refine the skills of both the students and the teachers.

Students explore all aspects of the industry of their choosing. This means exposure to each component of an industry, to include sales and marketing, management and finance, technical skills, labor and community issues, health and safety, environmental issues, etc. Career majors help guide students on the road ahead, allowing for maximum exposure to an industry. Majors may be in arts and communication, business and management, health occupations, human services, manufacturing and engineering technologies, and natural resources. Labor unions, businesses, and governments are working together as equal partners with education. They are charged to transform workplaces into active learning environments, enabling all parties to offer work-based learning to all students.

Under the STW umbrella staff development means that opportunities abound that allow teachers and educational professionals to experience internships with outside employers. Individuals can also share information about contextual learning, portfolio assessment, and new uses of technology.

Within STW programs, states must develop a "roll-out" strategy for gradual but complete implementation. The sub-state structure can be divided into regions, local labor market areas, service delivery areas, educational areas such as community college boundaries or school districts, economic development areas, geographic boundaries, or school districts. The rollout plan allows the state to become completely participating over a period of 5 years while bringing on the local partnerships across the state.

STW: Programs That Work

Effective transition programs include longitudinal planning, emphasis on careers and not disability labels, work-based learning, connections to community resources, and sustained involvement of employers. There is also wisdom in beginning early. The IEP Transition Plan can begin as early as age 14. This process is effective when influenced by students, families, other significant adults in the home, school, and the work environment. One tenet of the program is clear, students focusing on career majors tend to achieve better employment

outcomes. Career exploration, assessment, job shadowing, internships, and paid work experiences are all a part of work-based learning. Paid work is especially critical. Family support, living arrangements, income, peer interactions, and other circumstances can also significantly affect post-school outcomes.

Strategies for serving youth with disabilities, including deaf and hard-of-hearing students, focus on partnerships, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and student self-determination. Programs for youth with disabilities work best when treated as part of the existing STW system. Full integration within the school offers youth access to the same range of services and opportunities provided to all students.

In addition, STW is most effective when individual planning and career development activities are considered. When student preferences are the focus for the transition plan, students experience the process of decision-making, build their self-esteem, and develop their ability to work and live independently.

STW is not a series of year-long programs. The Transition Plan in the IEP should help to focus on how services today can apply to the workforce demands of tomorrow. High standards must guide transition programming and be used to assess individual and program performance. There is an array of interpersonal skills required for success at work. Youth should be allowed to develop these skills and become actively engaged in all aspects of community life and continue to focus on lifelong learning and social integration. The same opportunities should be available to students who are deaf or hard of hearing as to all youth.

Within the STW Program, all partners are responsible for the student's success. Employers are willing to invest time and resources if they perceive direct benefit, and have the opportunity to influence curriculum, directly train prospective employees, and receive effective consultation in workforce preparation. Parents, teachers, counselors, service providers, and students should all be equal partners in the development of the EIP and the Transition Plan. Ongoing contact among partners prevents duplication of services, allows for coordination of services, and fosters support by all partners.

STW Programs often require the services of a transition specialist. This person can offer career guidance and counseling to students and their parents. The specialist can assist businesses in adapting their workplaces to meet the needs of youth with special needs. Teachers must learn how to teach advanced skills while holding to high standards, and parents must learn how to help their children take advantage of a wider range of options. This specialist can also work with

the vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor, to provide background information and support in the STW process.

STW: Choices

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students have major choices to make before leaving high school. Opportunities are available to enter college, trade school, or the world of work.

For high school graduates who do not pursue higher education, research has shown that the employment picture is marginal, at best. Welsh & MacLeod-Gallinger (1992) report labor force participation rates of only 75 percent for deaf and hard-of-hearing graduates with only a high school degree. This compares to an overall participation rate of 93 percent for graduates with baccalaureate degrees. In addition they report that individuals with no college degree earn, on average, 32 percent less than their hearing peers, while for those with a bachelor degree the difference is only 17 percent.

Fortunately, many graduates choose to continue their education and two of the most popular college choices are Gallaudet University and Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf. It has been demonstrated that students graduating from college experience significant economic benefits over a lifetime of work. (Welsh & MacLeod-Gallinger, 1992)

The *Gallaudet University Alumni Survey of 1999* (Lam, King, Skilton, et al, 2000), concluded that when deaf high school graduates enter college or another post-secondary educational institution, they expect to have higher earnings and greater job satisfaction as a result of their college experience. From 1990-1999, 28 percent of Gallaudet University's graduates earned bachelors degrees in business administration, economics, finance, or psychology. Twenty-five percent of alumni of private colleges receive advanced degrees, while 43 percent of Gallaudet undergraduates pursued advanced degrees.

According to the *Rochester Institute of Technology's Annual Report for 2000* (Simone & Davila, 2000), graduates of Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technological Institute for the Deaf earn 36% more during their lifetime than those who drop out or who do not come to college. More than one-third of NTID graduating students enter jobs in science and engineering professions, and one-quarter each in business occupations and visual communication areas. Graduates are also employed as counselors, teachers, and social workers. Seventy-three per cent of male graduates earned degrees in business, science, applied science, and engineering, while only 42 percent of females graduated in these same career areas. Females, however, earned more

bachelor degrees in imaging arts and liberal arts than males (58% and 27%, respectively).

Where Do We Go From Here?

Current trends are noteworthy. The numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing students being trained and educated in isolation are becoming fewer and fewer. Legislation such as IDEA has allowed for early identification and intervention on part of local school districts. However, America's deaf and hard-of-hearing students continue to perform low on standardized tests of achievement, so low that they will have a difficulty competing independently in a technical society. Traditionally, Deaf college students enter NTID with language skills at between the seventh and ninth grade level (Simone & Davila, 2000). The average length of time required to complete an associate degree is about four years and a bachelor degree, about 6 years. The contributing factors for the extended length of time are the inability to carry a full credit hour load, leave of absences averaging a year or more, remediation time, and career changes.

Communication skills are key for deaf and hard-of-hearing students to be able to learn and compete in the world of work. When preparing for the transition from school to work, communication must be the cornerstone for all preparedness programs. "It is incumbent upon us to increase our efforts to ensure that deaf children can grow up to enjoy all the benefits of literacy (Moores & Miller, 2001). Deaf workers often use a language that is different from their English speaking co-workers and supervisors. Currently, the world's economic language is English. (Mayer & Akamatsu, 2000). Either workers must be competent in reading, writing, and speaking English, or there must be supports available on the job to compensate for the differences in languages. Many times the worker must be able to read and write and understand reports, manuals, forms, electronic mail, written communication, educational materials, safety tip brochures, etc., or there may be an increased risk of danger on the job.

The deaf or hard-of-hearing worker may attempt to avoid careers that involve a lot of reading and writing. This avoidance results in becoming underutilized and underemployed, decreasing quality of life. Recent bachelor degree graduates (1991-1999) from Gallaudet University were surveyed for literacy skill requirements on the job. Over 70% reported that writing skills (formal and informal) and over 80% of reading skills were very important for their job (Lam, et al, 2000).

Without college education or training, deaf or hard-of-hearing persons often enter unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. With continued

education, they tend to enter into professions similar to their hearing peers. Literacy requirements on the job heavily influence job retention and promotion of deaf or hard-of-hearing workers. Salary differences are noted in the Gallaudet University Alumni Survey (Lam, et al, 2000) and the RIT Annual Report (Simone & Davila, 2000), stating that hearing peers of similar ages tend to earn higher salaries. If literacy skills are not strong, perhaps support services such as interpreters and notetakers can be provided to help eliminate language barriers. Deaf or hard-of-hearing workers teaching sign language classes to co-workers and supervisors can have a great impact on confidence and acceptance on the job. Such activities contribute to hearing workers learning about deaf culture, opening the door for greater understanding and assistance on the job.

New scientific discoveries transform jobs, lives, and the shape of public issues. Preparedness for the future must link to the economy, technologies, and education for a rapidly changing workforce. In 1999 alone, employers spent over $62.5 billion on upgrading basic skills of their employees; skills that should have been acquired during school years. It is projected that jobs in the health sciences and computer industries requiring advanced mathematics and science skills will increase by 5.6 million by 2008. Curriculums must be adopted, similar to general education curriculums, that offer equal and ample opportunities for deaf or hard-of-hearing students to prepare for work and life in general. Efforts need to focus on ensuring adequate education and job training to be sure deaf and hard-of-hearing students can make the school-to-work transition to more satisfying and enriched lives. If properly educated, deaf and hard-of-hearing students will not have to wonder at the end of high school years, "Where do we go from here?"

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