



TRANSITION WHEEL

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

Description/Definition

Interagency collaboration is cross-agency cooperation that identifies, records, and disseminates information on related resources and services; identifies gaps and overlaps in services as well as areas of agency expertise; and leads to strategic decision making that broadens the collective capacities of participating agencies (Timmons, Podmostko, Bremer, Lavin, & Wills, 2005, pp. 4-2 to 4-3). Interagency collaboration often leads to formal or informal understandings or agreements that describe the participating agencies, collaborative vision or mission, purpose of the collaboration, legal and operational requirements, procedures and timelines, financial responsibilities, dispute resolution, monitoring, and evaluation (Lubbers, 2006).

Relevance

Researchers have identified interagency collaboration as a factor related to post-school success (Finn & Kohler, 2009; Noonan, Morningstar, & Erickson, 2008). Interagency collaboration has also been a long-standing priority, dating back to at least the 1980s, of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in the U.S. Department of Education (Heal, Copher, & Rusch, 1990).

By law, interagency collaboration mechanisms or agreements are required between state educational agencies and other public agencies that provide special education or related services, such as assistive technology, supplementary aids and services, and transition. Interagency agreements must include the financial responsibilities of each public agency according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA; IDEA Guidance Letter, 2000).

History/Legal Basis

Interagency collaboration in the United States began in the 1930s when it was part of the community schools movement to coordinate services to children and families (Pounder, 1998). More recently, interagency collaboration requirements have been part of the School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (including Vocational Rehabilitation), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004.

Interagency collaboration in Florida includes several initiatives related to the transition of youth with disabilities. *Project CONNECT* began in 1998 as a statewide transition initiative focused on improving interagency collaboration in transition planning at the community level through the formation or revitalization of local community transition teams. Its goals were to identify strengths, gaps, and barriers to interagency collaboration in transition planning; develop local solutions; develop local interagency agreements or ways of working; implement effective transition practices; develop a statewide infrastructure for support and collaboration; and collect data to identify needs and evaluate implementation. *Project CONNECT* grew from five sites in seven counties in 1998 to 45 sites in 61 counties in 2006–07. Historically, many districts functioned as one team and included Partners in Transition (PIT) and the Transition to Independence Process Project as well as *Project CONNECT*. In 2008–09, with statewide restructuring of discretionary projects supporting exceptional student education, this initiative was assumed by Project 10 and renamed Project 10 *CONNECT*.

Partners in Transition, a project of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, began in 2002 with two objectives. The first was to implement a comprehensive statewide plan for transition that systematically addresses secondary and postsecondary transition issues that will assist the young people of Florida to make successful transitions from school to adult roles, including initiating a process for aligning resources at the federal, state, and local level to increase interagency collaboration toward postsecondary education and transition efforts. The second objective was to increase capacity at the state and local levels to implement strategies that result in improved transition outcomes for students with disabilities in Florida.

across all the —quality of life|| domains (i.e., employment, postsecondary education, community and independent living, recreation and leisure, etc.)

Florida’s State Secondary Transition Interagency Committee, formerly the Transition Steering Committee, is a state-level initiative that began in January 2008 to identify and align capacity-building resources and work collaboratively to improve transition across stakeholders. This committee has broad stakeholder representation, including all major state-level partners, and recently completed a series of stakeholder focus groups across the state to identify transition needs and concerns. Another interagency group focused on the transition of youth with disabilities in Florida is Intra Agency Partners, a cross-disciplinary team of Department of Education staff with members representing the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Division of Blind Services, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, Division of Florida Colleges and Division of Career and Adult Education, and the State University System of Florida. This group looks at emerging issues, such as access to postsecondary education, and works with staff in their respective agencies/bureaus to develop potential strategies to improve post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities.

Overview

The needs of students with disabilities during the transition process are complex, and no single agency has all the knowledge or resources to provide comprehensive transition services (Robic, 2009).

To effectively serve youth, interagency collaboration is needed simultaneously at the state, region, county, district, school, community, and/or individual student levels (Blalock, 1996; Stodden, Brown, Galloway, Mrazek, & Noy, 2005; Timmons et al., 2005). Collaboration may be driven by youth and family needs, local resources and expertise, and legal requirements. Specific goals, outcomes, processes, responsibilities, strategies, and stakeholders vary in each collaborative group, but common goals for transition collaboration are to improve outcomes for youth; —enhance, develop, and support effective transition programs and services for students|| (Blalock & Benz, 1999, p. 3); eliminate duplication of services; and focus resources more effectively.

Educator and agency representatives interested in collaborating may employ a number of approaches to develop a collaborative process, including focus groups, resource mapping, and strategic planning. Focus groups are small groups of participants who are led by a moderator through a series of open-ended questions to discuss an issue in depth (Jayanthi & Nelson, 2002, p. 2). Resource mapping, also known as asset mapping or environmental scanning, is a system-building process for identifying and aligning resources and policies (Crane & Mooney, 2005) as well as service gaps and barriers (Timmons et al., 2005).

After resource mapping, interagency teams usually initiate a planning process to identify and agree upon goals, outcomes, timelines, strategies, roles, responsibilities, policies, and accountability mechanisms, such as performance measures and an evaluation plan (Blalock, 1996; Blalock & Benz, 1999; Stodden et al., 2005). A memorandum of understanding (MOU) or interagency agreement may be written to formalize interagency goals and practice (Timmons et al., 2005). Information on collaborative models and cost sharing can be found in Timmons (2007).

A template for an —Interagency Articulation Agreement to Support the Transition Process of Students with Disabilities|| developed by the Florida Department of Education can be found at <http://www.project10.info/files/TransitionMOATemplate.doc> (Williams, 2006). The interagency agreement was developed to eliminate gaps and misalignment of services for transitioning students with disabilities and was based on a state-level memorandum of agreement (MOA). State partners included three entities within the Florida Department of Education (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Division of Blind Services), Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Children’s Medical Services in the Florida Department of Health, and Mental Health services in the Florida Department of Children and Families. The state MOA contained a joint vision and promoted coordination of transition services, joint planning, and collaboration in the individual educational plan (IEP) process (Williams, 2006).

Evidence-based and Best Practice

Research has shown that interagency collaboration is necessary for successful adult outcomes for youth, but challenges are often encountered in creating and maintaining effective collaborations (Noonan, Morningstar, & Erickson, 2008; Robic, 2009). Florida's *Project CONNECT* and Pennsylvania's Communities of Practice are two examples of initiatives that have been successful in coordinating services for transitioning youth.

Project CONNECT (renamed Project 10 CONNECT in 2008–09)

Project 10 *CONNECT* began as *Project CONNECT* and now has over 40 teams across Florida that are focused on improving interagency collaboration at the region, county, or community level as well as on identifying promising practices for comprehensive, continuous transition services for students. Documented benefits include increased awareness, communication, and collaboration among stakeholders; increased access and coordination of services; and development of a statewide support network for sharing materials and ideas.

Project 10 *CONNECT* agency partners continue to include the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, career and technical (vocational) and adult education, postsecondary education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Division of Blind Services, Juvenile Justice, dropout prevention, Social Security Administration, Family Network on Disabilities, Children's Medical Services, Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System, Multiagency Network for Students with Emotional Disabilities, service providers, community organizations, transportation, parent organizations, and employers.

Project 10 *CONNECT* sites begin by conducting focus groups of potential partners, including students and adults with disabilities and their families, to identify and discuss existing collaboration, barriers to collaboration, and community-based solutions. An interagency working group is formed and uses information from the focus groups and other sources to develop strategies, an action plan, and an interagency agreement or MOU. Sites also collect data, evaluate their initiatives, develop necessary materials, and provide training opportunities. Information on Project 10 *CONNECT* is available through the Project 10 Regional Transition Representatives at <http://project10.info/contact.php>.

Communities of Practice

The IDEA Partnership at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education has several resources for communities of practice on its Web site (<http://ideapartnership.org/page.cfm?pageid=29>), including a guide for starting a community of practice, resources, and a social networking Web site (<http://www.sharedwork.org>) where practice groups can store and share information.

The state of Pennsylvania took a different approach to interagency collaboration and enacted a memorandum of understanding in 1999 with the intent of coordinating services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997. The statewide MOU resulted in a number of —communities of practice,|| including the Pennsylvania Community on Transition or PACT. Communities of practice enhance existing interagency collaborations by providing a different way to use the knowledge and experience of partners to solve complex problems (Cashman, Linehan, & Rosser, 2007). PACT —practice groups|| examine specific aspects of transition, including community participation, competitive employment, healthy lifestyles, mental health, transportation, and youth engagement (Podmostko, 2007).

Resources for Starting and Maintaining Local Interagency Teams

Transition models can be used to focus, organize, and evaluate interagency teams and systems change. Two commonly used models are the Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler, 1996) and the National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition's *National Standards and Quality Indicators* (NASSET, 2005). Kohler's model has five components:

- Family Involvement
- Program Structure
- Interagency Collaboration
- Student Development
- Student-Focused Planning

The NASET standards and quality indicators were developed in five —key areas|| that focus groups thoroughly discussed and examined (NASET, 2005, p. 3):

1. Schooling
2. Career Preparatory Experiences
3. Youth Development and Youth Leadership
4. Family Involvement
5. Connecting Activities

A number of resources provide step-by-step explanations for building and maintaining community transition teams, including evidence-based practices, data-based decision making, focus groups, sample forms, and resources.

Stodden et al. (2005, pp. 9–11) describe five —tools|| for interagency transition teams, beginning with nine Principles of Teaming that are —quality indicators for high-functioning community teams||:

1. A team reflects and demonstrates a shared/collective vision.
2. A team promotes empowerment of all members.
3. A team demonstrates shared decision making.
4. A team demonstrates synergy—the whole is more than the sum of its parts.
5. A team highly regards diversity as a necessary part of creativity and collaboration.
6. A team fosters the full inclusion and participation of people impacted by its actions.
7. A team facilitates the self-determination and personal growth of itself and its individual members.
8. A team is responsive to its authentic (ecologic) context (i.e., the local environment).
9. A team reflects and demonstrates a dynamic and fluid quality (i.e., remains flexible, adaptable, and accommodating).

The other four tools provide a sequence of recommended steps, tips on applying the nine principles, and worksheets for “building an effective interagency transition team..., deciding initial roles, responsibilities, and the team vision..., conducting interagency transition team meetings..., and knowing if your interagency team is on-track and meeting its goals” (Stodden et al., 2005, p. 7). Types of activities described include recruiting team members, creating mission and vision statements, determining roles and responsibilities, conducting team meetings, resource mapping, and evaluating the team’s progress. More detailed information on resource mapping can be found in Crane and Mooney (2005).

Everson and Guillory (2002) describe hands-on strategies for facilitating interagency teams based on five stages identified by Tuckman and Jenson (1977): forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Numerous tools are provided for determining in which stage a team is operating, developing action plans, convening meetings, implementing action plans, maintaining direction and focus, and evaluating and revising policies and procedures.

Blalock and Benz (1999) describe the roles of community transition teams and explain how to build a representative team, plan for success, conduct a needs assessment, develop and implement an action plan, and evaluate and update the plan. Appendices in their book contain sample forms and procedures, including a strategic planning tool, interagency agreement, calendar, and annual plan.

Correa, Jones, Thomas, and Morsink (2005) describe a model of —interactive teaming|| for students with disabilities based on:

- “Consultation, the sharing of knowledge by one professional with another.
- Collaboration, mutual efforts between professionals and parents to meet the special needs of children and young people” (p. vi).

Correa et al. (2005) discuss the historical foundation and rationale for interactive teaming, facilitating factors such as communication and coordination skills, and implementation issues such as cultural and linguistic diversity and students with moderate and significant disabilities.

Syntheses of research articles and studies have identified both challenges and best practices for interagency collaboration.

Challenges to meeting interagency goals included structural barriers, such as lack of access to social services and transportation, misperceptions about people with disabilities, negative economic or employment trends, and cultural and institutional barriers. Outside forces that may impact interagency effectiveness include educational reform initiatives, legislative action or inaction, and a focus on short-term outcomes (Blalock, 1996).

Noonan, Morningstar, and Erickson (2008) found that effective interagency teams in five states used multiple strategies and funding sources and were highly flexible. States provided technical assistance, and transition coordinators had critical roles in providing administrative support to the teams. Relationship building; training of staff, youth, and families; adult agency meetings with youth and families; and information dissemination strategies were also important components.

A review of the implementation of Community Transition Team Model (CTTM) in Oregon identified three guiding principles that appear to be critical to the success of interagency collaborations (and that reinforce findings from other programs):

- The active participation of diverse stakeholders must be viewed as essential to the partnership and change process.
- Change must be viewed as a process and not as an event.
- Local community partnerships must be supported by a larger structure that sustains and validates their efforts locally and facilitates networking between communities to achieve broader impact throughout the state (Benz, Lindstrom, & Halpern, 1995).

Final Thoughts

- The idea of starting an interagency collaboration process can be overwhelming. Start by convening a small group of motivated representatives from at least two agencies who can guide initial efforts and identify stakeholder groups to invite to the table.
- Identify an overall planning approach by expanding on or reactivating existing interagency efforts such as Project 10 *CONNECT*, accessing stakeholder expertise, and/or researching successful models such as Communities of Practice.
- Stakeholders need compelling reasons to participate in interagency collaboration. The current economic crunch with its negative impact on agency budgets and services may be a motivator and incentive for sharing resources.
- At the outset, focus groups and other information-gathering efforts can build community and interest by engaging stakeholders, identifying priority needs, and reinforcing the potential benefits of collaborating.
- Include data collection from multiple stakeholders and evaluation planning in initial discussions. Collect baseline data at the beginning of interagency planning so that service changes and improved outcomes can be used in problem solving, planning, and celebrating.
- Report on progress regularly. Stakeholder interest and participation will decrease if progress is not apparent.
- Always include youth with disabilities and family members on interagency teams. They are the ultimate focus for improved outcomes.
- Build on the positive rather than dwell on the negative. Recognize successful services and policies of stakeholder organizations and build on them.
- Be mindful of people's time by setting and respecting reasonable agendas and goals for interagency meetings.
- Celebrate your successes!

Resources

IDEA Partnership

<http://www.ideapartnership.org>

This partnership provides support and information, including guides and resources, for communities of practice operating in several states as well as other interested parties.

National Center for Secondary Education and Transition

<http://www.ncset.org>

NCSET has multiple resources related to interagency collaboration, including —Essential Tools|| for community resource mapping and interagency transition team development and facilitation and related issues briefs.

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/youth)

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info>

Chapters of NCWD/youth publications, such as the *High School/High Tech Program Guide*, *Career Planning Begins with Assessment*, and *Tunnels and Cliffs*, contain information on components of effective collaborations and MOUs, roles and responsibilities by organizational level, resource mapping, and an interagency data-sharing agreement.

Project 10 *CONNECT*

<http://www.project10.info/ContactUs.aspx>

For information on forming or reactivating a Project 10 *CONNECT* interagency transition council, contact a Project 10 regional representative at the link above.

Transition Technical Assistance Center (TTAC), The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

<http://ttac.uncc.edu>

TTAC's TIP sheet on interagency collaboration describes the benefits of interagency collaboration as well as responsibilities of community, school, and individual level teams.

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