



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series January 2013

#### **Students with Disabilities and High Stakes Testing: An Impossible Dichotomy?** How Transition Programs Support Teachers and Students in Toppenish School District

Literature reviews, over time, have consistently demonstrated the importance of effective transition programs at the secondary level to produce positive post school outcomes for students with disabilities. Greater success is experienced by the individual in relation to job outcomes, self-determination, independent living, and general self-worth when key transition components have been addressed while in middle and high school (Landmark et.al, 2010). Parent involvement, social/self-determination curriculum, work experiences, as well as inclusion in general education programs are some of the components that have contributed to a student’s post- secondary success.

The trend in schools, since NCLB became a federal mandate, has been for ALL students to meet the high stakes testing requirements. While the drive for learning at all levels is crucial, it has given educators cause for concern with the push to include disabled students in the general education setting. Evaluation tools are becoming more rigorous and focused on outcomes as well, which only serves to add to the anxiety teachers are experiencing. How to teach, so that students meet the standards while making accommodations for one or two students, is a question that can’t be answered effectively without effective transition practices for inclusion.

#### **Least Restrictive Environment**

Students in a self-contained placement with limited interaction with nondisabled peers are less prepared for life beyond school (Landmark et.al 2010). The question has become when is the appropriate time to transition the disabled youth into more generalized classrooms with nondisabled youth. The Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 requires that children be included in or with nondisabled students to the greatest extent possible, which is referred to as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Over time, research has shown that when early interventions in a Least Restrictive Environment are implemented with young children, these children experience greater success transitioning from preschool to elementary school and from grade to grade at the elementary level (Fox et. al 2002 and Doyle 2000).

#### **Current Practices in Toppenish**

Currently, Toppenish School District implements School to Work transition services, as required, however the conversation has begun regarding the need to build a greater understanding of transition at all levels. This is a shift from the focus on transitions within a school to a broader focus on all levels in the district - preschool to elementary, elementary to middle, and middle to high school. Moving to a transition process which includes disabled youth in general education programs to the greatest extent possible and providing teachers with critical student information defines a sustainable transition. By focusing on the district transition program within buildings and across the system, there is a greater likelihood that students will develop self-determination and skill sets that will lead to greater success beyond the confines of the school system.

This year in Toppenish, several students were moved from a self-contained placement, where their only participation with nondisabled peers was during lunch and activity time, into a general education and resource room placement. While these students spend more than 50 percent of their time in a resource room, they are in the regular classroom for shortened periods of time for workshop, writing, and science/social studies. This is a major shift in Toppenish, as the number of students being included is much greater than in the past.

Not only are disabled students from self-contained programs being placed in the least restrictive placement in regular classrooms, they are also moving within the special education classrooms. This means that students are experiencing what it is like to transition from the more restrictive services to less restrictive and with less disabled

youth. In so doing, it has raised the anxiety of not only the general education teachers but the special education resource room teachers, who have not typically worked with these students.

### **Supporting Students and Staff**

The demands of students meeting standards and giving students the greatest opportunity to learn with their nondisabled peers seems to be colliding with teacher accountability. Teachers will need to learn new teaching strategies which enable disabled students to move closer to meeting the benchmark. How we transition students in the building, across buildings, and beyond is critical for all students, disabled and nondisabled alike, as student learning and teacher accountability are greatly impacted.

Supporting the staff with the implementation of effective teaching practices has begun in Toppenish with GLAD, BERC, and PBIS to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills for implementing effective learning practices (not just teaching practices but how to recognize student engagement and learning). Teachers work within their PLC groups to develop Response to Intervention (RTI) practices within their grade levels prior to referring students to the school support team and a possible special education referral. Data is driving many practices within the district, resulting in fewer students being referred for special education services, leading to increased teacher frustration and anxiety related to accountability.

### **Next Steps**

Improving the skill sets of teachers working with disabled students, as well as modifying curriculum in ways that enable teachers to teach a variety of ability levels, is an ongoing challenge within the Toppenish School District, and in school districts across the country. Because self-determination, parent involvement, and inclusion in general education can result in successful post school outcomes, it is imperative that schools develop transition plans at every level preschool through high school. The most effective plans are those which are data driven and include the student, family, school, and community. The district has begun this process by meeting with Kindergarten parents through the WA Kids grant and by assessing students several times a year.

As school districts consider strengthening transition plans for disabled students, it is important that plans be student-centered and data driven. Student-centered planning meetings that include the former and new teacher(s), the parent, the student (at every age level), and any outside agencies involved with that student would be the first step and should occur prior to school starting (the week or two before school starts the new year). Based on the student-centered plan, curriculum is reviewed and teachers are assigned tasks to develop strategies to modify or find alternative ways to teach concepts. Special education curriculum should be aligned to basic education curriculum and standards through a collaboration of special education and general education teachers. As transition is not solely for the disabled, having all students in a classroom complete a learning styles assessment will help the teacher develop a multitude of teaching strategies to increase student learning and success. These assessments can be a valuable part of a student-centered plan. Another suggestion for successful transitions is to build a library of modified curriculum and teaching practices which support the Response to Intervention model. This will give teachers the resources they need to utilize greater teaching practices which are effective for all students, which will in turn reduce the anxiety of accountability and high stakes testing.

### **References:**

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