

Too often, urban models for transition programming have been recommended for use in rural settings. What we need are rural transition services that are "Golden Gate" in quality and one-lane bridge in operation.

A Bridge in the Country: Transition Services for the Mildly Handicapped in Rural Areas

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The most popular analogy used when referring to the transition of handicapped students from school to work is that of a bridge. Professionals, parents, and students alike can grasp the essential concept of transition—of linking a student's school experience with adult life—by envisioning various kinds of bridges, from simple, shaky rope and wood structures to heavily riveted suspension bridges. These represent the many variations in range and quality of transition services experienced by the handicapped. It is only natural, when using this analogy, to imagine the best, most complete services as resembling a "transitional Golden Gate," a grand and beautiful structure built to move handicapped students safely and predictably from beneficial school programs to meaningful employment and personal/social adjustment. But remember where the real Golden Gate is located. Now think for a moment of a rural setting you are familiar with. Take the Golden Gate Bridge and imagine it placed in this rural setting. This beautiful, functional structure suddenly seems totally out of place.

Herein lies the dilemma of providing transition services to mildly handicapped students in rural areas. Too often, urban service delivery models have been recommended for use in rural settings with students who are learning disabled, behaviorally disordered, or mildly retarded (Helge, 1987). These models, although useful in many respects, are not necessarily reconceptualized in keeping with the

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unique advantages and disadvantages of providing education to handicapped students in rural areas. These areas of strength and weakness have been well documented (e.g., Halpern, 1982; Helge, 1984, 1987; Kirmer, Lockwood, Hickler, and Sweeney, 1984). Among the greatest disadvantages: transportation problems caused by long distances between programs; difficulties recruiting and maintaining qualified staff; irregular availability of specialists; and unstable local economies. Among the greatest advantages: community participation in school life; informal communication among educators, students, and parents; and ability to provide individualized help due to smaller enrollments. These factors have positive and negative effects on all rural school programs including transition programs, and must be considered when implementing any program model. The intention is to have rural transitional services that are "Golden Gate" in quality but one-lane bridge in operation.

Laying the Foundation

A widely-used generic model for facilitating school-to-work transition has been provided by Wehman (1984). It provides a useful starting point for planning service delivery and can be adapted to fit within a rural context. Wehman's model illustrates movement through three stages, including a) school instruction, b) planning for the transitional process, and c) placement into meaningful employment. In this model, the secondary education program becomes the foundation on which the bridge of transition is built. Wehman suggests three critical characteristics of an appropriate school program: a) a functional curriculum, b) integration with non-handicapped peers, and c) community-based service delivery.

A curriculum can be considered functional if it is designed to prepare students for opportunities that are available in their community. One impact of the economic realities in many rural communities is that there may be few employment alternatives. Rural economies have been strained by fluctuations and failures in farming, fishing, mining, and forestry (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Design of a functional school curriculum might be heavily influenced by the nature of work done in a rural community's single predominant industry or by small businesses that have survived amidst the economic downturn. Personnel who work with the mildly handicapped must assess suitable employment options and the specific skills needed to succeed in these jobs in order to make the curriculum appropriate to these needs. For example, a teacher in a transition program for mildly handicapped students in rural Utah used an "employee behavior checklist," given to a variety of local employers, to determine the various academic and social skills that were required to perform entry level jobs. A skill that was mentioned by nearly all the employers in her particular community was use of the telephone. Many beginning employees were required to take messages and seek information over the phone. Since the majority of students in her program also attended mainstream classes, the transition teacher's first action was to attempt to locate classes which included this skill in their curricula. Despite the measured importance of this skill to employers in the community, instruction of phone skills was not found in the curriculum guides of regular courses. There was a similar absence of curricular emphasis on skills such as following directions and form completion. Using these data from her own community, it became this teacher's task to create new curricular priorities that include the interpersonal skills, job-related academic skills, and specific vocational skills necessary for transition education (Okolo and Sitlington, 1986).

Once a more functional curriculum has been identified, instruction should take place that integrates handicapped students with non-handicapped peers. This is easily accomplished with mildly handicapped students since most attend many mainstream classes. In rural schools, many of the students have grown up together and have been naturally integrated because of their proximity to one another. A greater concern is the appropriateness of the methods and outcomes in mainstream classes. It is important that the instructional techniques used are beneficial for students who have long histories of academic failure. Instructional methods and desired student outcomes should be modulated in keeping with the unique educational needs of handicapped learners. The role of the special education teacher, relevant to transition, is to collaborate with regular educators to encourage and facilitate the use of effective instructional techniques in mainstream classes. In urban schools, formal communication and collaboration systems are usually suggested or required to accommodate this role. Teachers in rural schools may have an advantage because of the lower number of personnel who need to interact and because more personal communication networks can be established.

The third characteristic of an appropriate secondary transition program is that it be community-based. In a rural context, this goal is difficult to reach for a number of reasons: remoteness of job sites; lack of transportation; and close-minded, conservative attitudes towards serving the handicapped by some members of the community. Again, rural special educators need to take advantage of the more casual, personal atmosphere that exists in most small communities. Forming car pools, finding volunteer drivers, or personally transporting students becomes somewhat easier to arrange through an informal communication network when working with fewer students. Teachers who have problems accommodating a community-based program because of their own scheduling conflicts and multitude of duties, can look to regional centers or cooperatives for personnel who possibly can work with students away from the school setting.

Building the Bridge

For handicapped students, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) serves as the centerpiece for planning and delivering special services designed to meet unique individual needs. One of the barriers to providing transition services has been the failure to develop and use IEP's which include transition objectives and activities for mildly handicapped students (Sarkees and Veir, 1988). Representatives of the community and adult service agencies should be involved, as much as is practical, in program planning. The *Transition Guide* (1987) lists a number of resources and agencies that could be utilized, including:

- Rehabilitation services
- Job Service
- Vocational-technical centers
- Private Industry Councils
- Mental Health Centers
- Regional social service agencies

In rural areas, it is often possible to maintain more direct contact with adult service providers and to get services quickly. Since communication and monitoring can be frequent and direct there is less chance that students will get lost in the system.

The key to increasing community involvement seems to be having adequate current information. Several procedures are suggested to enhance information exchange:

1. Establish and maintain a community resource directory for school personnel.
2. Establish and maintain a school services directory for agency personnel.
3. Develop a parents' guide book to school and community services.
4. Provide annual training for school personnel in the processes for effective coordination of community resources.

The focus of program planning should not be solely on school and agency personnel. Students and their parents must play an active role accessing needed resources both in school and in the community. Rural lifestyles often result in closer family bonds and better networks of families, friends, and church members than in urban areas. A strong advocacy role on the part of the family can be the greatest advantage a student will have in making a smooth and rewarding transition from school to work. Such an advocacy role cannot be expected without orientation and training, however, and it is suggested that educators train students and their parents alike in such advocacy skills as self-appraisal, goal-setting, participation on planning meetings, negotiation, assertiveness, and understanding educational and social service programs.

The Other Side of the Bridge

The last stage of Wehman's model is the employment outcome. This is where the bridge is supposed to lead. Successful transition cannot happen without employment alternatives. For the mildly handicapped, this means competitive employment rather than work in enclaves or with a job coach. It is assumed that this population will receive some support, possibly involving post-secondary training, but that it will be of brief duration. Rural special educators can exercise control over this stage in several ways:

- Using local media, the Chamber of Commerce, and informal networks to develop job placement possibilities.
- Communicating the benefits of hiring people with disabilities to employers in the community.
- Teaching students to be skilled users of such job acquisition resources as Job Service, Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Vocational Rehabilitation and local newspapers.
- Assisting students in finding paid work experiences.

A student's early work experience is a valuable asset and, if managed effectively, can enrich school-based learning (Tindall, 1988; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Research conducted by Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe (1985) showed that students who had held paid part-time or summer jobs prior to graduation increased their chances of being employed following high school. Even the more mundane, robotic jobs such as many found in the fast-food industry can be useful for promoting good work habits and some basic occupational skills. In addition, students in a work environment often show increased motivation to learn. It is often the lack of such motivation in the school setting that has been the main contributor to their poor performance.

Summary

Just as it is inaccurate to assume that all large cities are just alike, so it is equally inaccurate to draw the same conclusion about rural communities. It is easy to make sweeping generalizations about the economic state, population mix, and prevailing attitudes in rural America but the fact is that rural subcultures vary a great deal and no single

perspective captures this diversity. Regardless of their differences, all rural school districts share the challenge of providing special education services that facilitate the school-to-work transition of students with handicaps. These services begin with a secondary program of studies that provides curricula appropriate to the transition goals of each student and that utilize instructional methods that are effective with students who have unique educational needs. This foundation training leads to utilization of school, community, and social service resources to contribute cooperatively to program planning and linkages with employment and/or post-secondary training. Finally, entry-level work opportunities should be available and of a nature to establish the experience base upon which a successful career can be built.

Rural educators are faced with unique barriers to fulfilling the transition mission but also enjoy unique advantages that can, if taken advantage of, be used to build solid bridges to the future.

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