



# Transition

## Best Practice Update

### A SEAMLESS TRANSITION PROCESS

by  
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This article describes a recent paper on the Transition Service Integration Model by Certo and his colleagues. The model proposes a triad partnership between education, vocational rehabilitation, and developmental disabilities. Implementation data from a four-year trial in California and Maryland suggest that it is effective for students with disabilities.

#### *A Recent Conversation*

Not long ago I met with a colleague and former undergraduate student of mine. We talked a bit about recent life events, and quickly migrated to a discussion of our work. When I stated that I was involved in several transition initiatives, she remarked about how much of her work revolved around transition for her high school students. I asked how things were going on the transition front, and she said they were going well. Ever the professor, I asked about her guiding purpose and approach on transition for her students. She said, "Well, I work as hard as I can to get them ready to leave school." Further follow-up questions led us to conversation about how difficult the process was, especially when trying to coordinate meetings, services, and parent questions during transition. After some additional small talk, we said our goodbyes.

At the time, that teacher's comment ("get them ready to leave school") struck me as a good answer. This teacher was much like those I encounter each year; hard-working, dedicated to the school and community; and dedicated to the students and families they serve. In fact, I began to think back on my notes from my transition class in which this teacher had participated. You know, I think that was the type of answer I had taught her and had expected her to give. You can only imagine how pleased I was!!

Upon further reflection, though, I think that the teacher and I may have missed an essential point about transition. If you closely examine her response, this teacher was saying that it is our (the school's) job to take a student with disabilities through a process, and then pass them on to the next agency. Ed O'Leary, a national consultant in transition, has likened this to handing off a football. We (the educational system) run with the ball (student) until graduation, 18 or 21, and then hand it (him/her) off to the next carrier (one or more of the adult service providers). And we hope we don't fumble!

Perhaps our approach and philosophy needs to be refocused a bit. Rather than “getting the students through school”, we should be emphasizing “getting them ready for adult life”. Lou Brown from Madison, Wisconsin states that the main purpose of education is to prepare students with disabilities to “live, work and play in integrated adult communities.”

### ***A Recent Paper***

Shortly after this conversation, I received one of my professional journals. As I often do, I browsed quickly through the table of contents to see if any of my colleagues and acquaintances had written any recent papers. I saw that Mike Wehmeyer had written a nice article on using computers to facilitate money management. Ann Turnbull from Kansas had a good cultural diversity piece exploring person-centered planning in Asian American families. And then I saw an interesting article by Nick Certo and several of his colleagues on seamless transition. The words “seamless transition” caught my eye. But what could we do about the often disjointed system of services at this critical time in youth’s lives? And what had Certo discovered (or done) that someone else hadn’t already tackled? Fortunately for me, I was interested enough not to continue my tried and true practice of reviewing the table of contents and then filing the magazine. I read the article.

Entitled “*Review and Discussion of a Model for Seamless Transition to Adulthood*”, Certo and colleagues present what they call “a new model for service delivery, the Transition Service Integration Model” (p. 3). Under this model, education, vocational rehabilitation, and developmental disability service systems integrate funding and expertise to support students with significant disabilities during the transition process. Here’s how the system works.

*Conceptual framework.* The Transition Service Integration Model (TSIM) is designed to “go around” some typical transition barriers such as time-limited services (e.g., education ends at age 21, time limit from VR on getting and keeping a job), disjointed responsibilities (e.g., schools address education, VR addresses employment, DD addresses other life functioning areas), and funding restrictions. Instead, TSIM uses a person-centered planning model embedded into a one-stop workforce investment strategy. (See the article for a more complete description of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 component under which the model was developed.) The idea is that during the student’s last year in school, the public school, VR and DD combine funding, planning and implementation activities to assure that youth have paid employment and a full day of meaningful routines in preferred daily activities. Then this plan is carried forward for the student past the end of school services and into adulthood, making it a “seamless” system.

*Stage one.* The TSIM has two stages, prior to school exit, and post-school exit. In the first stage, the school enters into a formal service agreement with a local provider of disability services before the student leaves school. This provider agency must be eligible to provide both vocational rehabilitation and developmental disabilities services. Both school and provider agency staff share responsibility for developing employment and community activities for the student. Teachers represented the schools and an adult services aide represented the service agency. (The school system re-directed school funds to hire the adult services aide.) The teacher is provided office space in the service agency to facilitate scheduling, meetings, and staff interactions. These two agencies work concurrently to provide employment and daily living training throughout the student’s last year of school. A formal policy management group, with representatives from public education, rehabilitation, and developmental disabilities review student progress and resolve any policy issues that might arise during the year.

*Stage two.* Once the student leaves school, the policy management group serves as the single point of contact to request authorization of services. It is this group that also secures authorization of concurrent funding from VR and DD for the student for adult services. (In California and Maryland, as in most other states, policy dictates that only one agency can serve an adult with developmental disabilities at one time.) The authors facilitated policy that allowed this simultaneous funding by splitting responsibilities based on the mandates of each service system. Thus, VR could fund the “employment” portion of the day, while DD supported the individual during non-employment times.

*Results.* Certo presents data from four years of implementation of TSIM, and the results are promising. Two hundred thirty four students with significant needs were supported in 14 school districts, in 11 communities in two states. While participation in the process was voluntary, and individuals and their families could opt out at any time, 88% had a truly seamless transition (i.e., stayed with the same agency before and after graduation), and from 97% to 48% (average 63%) were employed at school exit. Wages ranged from \$4.76 to 7.76 per hour, with an average of \$6.78 per hour. Individuals were employed from 8 to 20 hours per week, with a total average of 13 hours per week. Ninety percent of all individuals are still receiving services from the initial service provider, and 71% is currently employed. Individuals average \$4,407 per annum in wages.

These data are amazing when one considers that most of the individuals served had significant intellectual, physical and medical disabilities. Nationally, only about 15% to 37% of these individuals are employed. The TSIM data suggest that as the numbers of persons involved in the program increases, the staff time needed to find employment within the final year of school becomes constrained. Thus, the lowest employment numbers at exit (48%) occurred in the fourth year of the project when the largest number of individuals, and those with the most severe disabilities entered the program.

### ***Some Thoughts***

Many secondary special education teachers have told me horror stories of well-intentioned transition plans gone awry because of system limitations, lack of funding, lack of time, or inability to access necessary employment and daily living supports. From their stories, even the ones billed as “success stories”, it is evident that the process is not seamless, nor is it easy, nor is it always effective. However, it is required and all of our teachers, rehabilitation staff and developmental disabilities professional work hard to assist students in leaving school successfully.

The original conversation with my former student has caused me to reflect significantly on what it is we should be doing as teachers, what we should be teaching as professors, and how systems might work better. First, I think we need to change our focus. We should be preparing youth to ENTER adulthood, not leave school. The “leaving” philosophy promotes lack of continuity, and some ending of service. Instead, an entrance-based model can succeed if one works collaboratively with other professionals, family members and individuals with disabilities. Certo’s article certainly lays out one approach for this to occur.

Second, I would urge our state leaders and policy-makers to take a risk. Certo and his colleagues convinced many professionals and families to take a risk with the TSIM process. While it succeeded, it certainly could have failed. While risky, its success positively impacted over 200 people. A question one might ask is, would failure have been any worse than doing nothing? Certainly the existing rates of unemployment for persons with disabilities are unacceptable. Taking a risk may produce a change, and, even if it didn’t work, wouldn’t likely cause any more harm than the present status quo.

Finally, we need to actually DO SOMETHING. Some may call this risk taking, and so be it. However, in my several years in the disability field, I have seen us invest huge amounts of resources in planning, collaboration, consultation, pilot studies, and conjuring with often little actual results. I say let's take a chance. While the TSIM may not be precisely what we need in North Dakota, it can lay the groundwork for some model that is implemented and serves youth as they transition into adulthood.

The article described in this paper is:

Certo, N., Mautz, D., Pumpian, I., Sax, C., Smalley, K., Wade, H.A., Noyes, D., Luecking, R., Weschler, J., & Batterman, N. (2003). Review and discussion of a model for seamless transition to adulthood. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 38*(1), 3-17.