

A History of Transition in Alabama

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During the past twenty years, serious national attention has been directed toward the issue of how well students with disabilities are prepared during their high school years to make a successful transition from school-to-work and community life. The mandate for the provision of transition services in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grew from growing concern with the dismal outcomes experienced by young adults with disabilities upon their leaving the school setting. In response, considerable attention has been given in Alabama to the factors affecting secondary school preparation of students with disabilities to more effectively enable the students to successfully transition from school into adult life. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of Alabama's initiatives developed for addressing this problem during the 1980s and 1990s. Highlighted here are recent specific strategic developments that have been taken to improve and expand the State's system for providing quality transition services and programs to Alabama's youth and young adults with disabilities. Special attention is given to the developments and activities of the 1990s.

Developments in the 1980s

In late 1983, a State Transition Task Force was formed to guide and direct Alabama's transition efforts. The State Task Force consisted of (a) state level representatives of Special Education, Vocational Education, Rehabilitation Services, and Mental Health/ Mental Retardation; (b) local school level representatives of Special Education, Vocational Education and Rehabilitation Services; (c) local school administrators; (d) an Alabama Developmental Disabilities Planning Council representative; (e) parent representatives; (f) an advocacy organization representative; (g) university representatives; and (h) business and industry representatives. Later, students with disabilities were added. This Task Force adopted a belief statement that reflected their vision for students and youth/young adults with disabilities. Central to this vision was the desire that "all citizens in Alabama, including individuals with disabilities, exit secondary education capable of achieving independence, productivity, inclusion, respect, and happiness in the community" (Alabama Department of Education, 1995, p.1).

Beginning in the early 1980s, the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) established mobile evaluation units for vocational assessment of secondary transitional students. By the start of the 1986-87 school year, every secondary school in Alabama had access to vocational assessment through this service. Also, in 1985, DRS began developing formal agreements of cooperation with local school systems in an effort to provide quality transition services to secondary students with disabilities. By the start of the 1986-87 school year, DRS had signed agreements of cooperation with all 126 local school systems in Alabama.

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On September 10, 1984, statewide cooperative interagency efforts officially began with the signing of an interagency cooperative agreement for individuals with disabilities. Entering into a state cooperative agreement for individuals with disabilities were three divisions of the Alabama State Department of Education (i.e., Special Education Services, Career/Technical Education, and Rehabilitation Services). This Agreement of Cooperation was based upon a mutual commitment to the provision of coordinated services that lead to the post-school goal of employment and a shared philosophy of student placement in the least restrictive environment. The stated goal of this agreement was to plan and conduct activities cooperatively that would provide leadership to, and encourage innovation by, local agencies in implementing an effective transition process.

In 1985, six regional interagency workshops were completed throughout the state. The purposes of these workshops were to disseminate transition guideline drafts for review and feedback, provide information concerning the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies, discuss pertinent legislation affecting transitional issues, and discuss the logistics of providing services to students with disabilities through the three main agencies. A total of 588 interagency personnel attended the six regional workshops, which included representation from all 128 Alabama local school districts. As an outcome of these workshops, special concerns were addressed by the State Transition Task Force. Transitional policies and procedural steps were included in the Alabama Administrative Policy Manual (Special Education Services) by the State Board of Education in April 1986. At this point, statements of transitional goals and specific transition services became a required part of each student's individual education plan (IEP) by the end of the 9th grade or by age 15. Parallel transition language was also added to the Special Needs Handbook - *All You Ever Wanted To Know About Special Needs But Didn't Know Who To Ask* (a Division of Career/Technical Education document).

In 1987, under the direction of the Alabama Transition Task Force, the Alabama Guidelines for Transition manual was developed jointly by Special Education Services (SES), Vocational Education (VE), and Rehabilitation Services (RS). The manual was developed to assist local education agencies with the design and implementation of a quality transition process for students with disabilities. Written for parents, professionals in the various agencies, and community/business leaders, the guide sought to help formalize the transition process so that stakeholders could understand it. Three critical components of an effective educational program were identified: the implementation of a functional curriculum, integrated service delivery models, and community-based instruction.

The guide strongly supported the belief that "the most functional and integrated school program will not optimally enhance post-school community living and employment adjustment without adequate and ongoing exposure to, and experience in, real life community living and employment situations" (Alabama Guidelines for Transition, Alabama State Department of Education, p. 31). The guide was disseminated to all secondary special education teachers, coordinators, and local school superintendents, as well as career/technical education and rehabilitation services personnel. Numerous school system and agency in-service programs on the transition process were conducted jointly by SES, VE, and RS personnel with the goal of developing unified agency policies, coordinated service delivery linkages, and local community

"ownership" and participation in the transition process. Finally, in 1989 a Job Readiness Curriculum was developed by Rehabilitation Services for use in the Alabama high schools with students with disabilities.

Developments in the 1990s

Mini-grants

During the 1990-1991 school year, Special Education Services began to offer transition mini-grants for the purpose of developing the first four community-based work instruction sites for students with disabilities in secondary school programs. In the 1991-1993 school years, 45 incentive grants for an approximate \$210,000 were funded by Special Education Services to encourage local education agencies (LEAs) to develop school and community-based work instruction as one option within the special education/vocational education curriculum.

Two other major developments occurred in 1990. First, Special Education Services began to offer workshops on secondary functional curricula with a focus on community-based work instruction. The requests for these workshops continued until the implementation of the Alabama Occupational Diploma program with over 200 workshops provided to transition stakeholders. Second, because of Alabama's commitment to the local team approach to service delivery in transition, the Special Education Services selected 19 local school systems to serve as "local" pilot transition projects, and funded them with incentive grants totaling \$110,000. This development was based on Alabama's philosophy that there must be total community "ownership" and participation in the transition process in order to improve the delivery of effective programs and services to produce successful outcomes (Alabama Guidelines for Transition, 1987).

Annual Conference

Beginning in April 1991, an annual statewide transition conference was co-sponsored by Auburn University's Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Special Education Services and Career/Technical Education, Alabama State Department of Education, and the Department of Rehabilitation Services. A \$10,000 seed grant from Auburn University's Extension Program was awarded to initiate this interagency effort. The purpose of this conference was to increase transition activities at the state and local level in terms of generating new, and improving the quality of existing, programs, strategies, policies, and techniques. In addition to bringing national transition leaders to the state, many invited presenters were and continue to be Alabama field-based practitioners, parents and students with disabilities.

During the Conference's 10 year history, the annual enrollment has steadily increased for a registration count of over 4,300 students, parents, teachers, rehabilitation counselors, job coaches, social caseworkers, employers, and administrators. These participants have engaged in a multitude of learning experiences through 287 concurrent sessions and 40 one-day workshops. Conference strands have included a wide

range of topical areas such as functional curriculum, community-based instruction, career/ technical programming, supported work, rehabilitation services, self-determination, families, personnel preparation, agency coordination, supported living, and Medicaid. A parent/ student network was organized through this annual event and funds from the Developmental Disabilities Planning Committee supported their conference attendance. In addition to their participation in all conference sessions, workshop sessions designed by and for parents and students with disabilities have become a component of this annual conference.

The practice has been made for participants to provide formal papers of their presentations. These papers have been gathered annually and are included in the published conference proceedings (see table below).

Table 1: Proceedings of the Alabama Transition Conference

<p>Browning, P. (Ed.) (1992). <i>Transition I in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University, (Proceedings of the 1st annual statewide conference on transition).</p>
<p>Browning, P. (Ed.) (1993). <i>Transition II in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University. (Proceedings of the 2nd annual statewide conference on transition).</p>
<p>Browning, P. (Ed.) (1994). <i>Transition III in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University. (Proceedings of the 3rd annual statewide conference on transition).</p>
<p>Browning, P. (Ed.) (1995). <i>Transition IV in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University. (Proceedings of the 4th annual statewide conference on transition).</p>
<p>Browning, P. (Ed.) (1995). <i>Transition IV in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University. (Proceedings of the 4th annual statewide conference on transition).</p>
<p>Browning, P., & Rabren, K. (1997). <i>Transition V and VI in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University. (Proceedings of the 5th and 6th annual statewide conference on transition).</p>
<p>Browning, P., & Rabren, K. (1999). <i>Transition VII and VIII in Alabama: A profile of commitment</i>. Auburn, AL: Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University.</p>

Multi-Agency Transition Project

The Multi-Agency Transition Project began as a collaborative effort of the State Department of Education, Special Education Services, the Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, and selected local school systems to support the development and implementation of a comprehensive pilot system of transition services and supports for secondary students with disabilities. The objectives of this effort, which began in the 1993-1994 school year, included implementation of: (a) a local transition team; (b) functional program of study with opportunities for on-campus and/or off-campus

vocational training; (c) job coach services in the student's senior year; and (d) service coordination services (assistance to students and families in obtaining needed services and supports). Collaborative financial support and training for each activity was provided as follows: (a) Community Transition Team Model (CTTM) provided by SES and DRS; (b) Life Centered Career Education curriculum provided by SES and the local school systems; (c) job coach provided by DRS; and (d) service coordination by MH/MR.

The purpose of the local transition team component was to expand the development of a network of community transition teams by incorporating in each school system the Community Transition Team Model (CTTM). The CTTM addresses critical transition services in six basic areas including curriculum and instruction, mainstreaming and coordination, transition services, documentation, administrative support, and adult services and community support. Composed of community leaders, educators, service provider professionals, persons with disabilities and families of students with disabilities, the CTTM meets quarterly to promote planning and delivery of transition services across local school and adult service agencies.

Special Education Services (SES) supported each pilot school system by providing curricula materials and staff development at both the local school and state level to facilitate implementation of the Life Centered Career Education (LCCE) curriculum, an extensive functional skill curriculum. The demand for the curriculum package became so great that SES soon provided one free set to all 128 LEAs if they bought one or more packages for themselves.

The addition of school-based job coaching services by the Department of Rehabilitation Services added a critical component to the overall school and rehabilitation service continuum. A great effort was made to not duplicate any existing employment-related services that would be potentially appropriate for a particular student. Students who could benefit from existing school programs (e.g., vocational educational training programs, co-op programs), with and without modifications, and students who could be successfully rehabilitated with existing traditional vocational rehabilitation services were not targeted for school-based job coaching. These students could be appropriately served in existing service options and, therefore, the primary issue for these students was to ensure that available services were actually provided. Students (as high school seniors) who require the more intensive one-on-one training and support services of the school-based job coach were targeted. No specific disability category requirements were attached to this program.

The school-based job coach's responsibilities included providing job-related student assessment, job development, job placement, on-site job coaching, and other job-related support services. The number of job coaches and the amount of Alabama's Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) funds committed has continued to increase each year. Currently, the state rehabilitation agency jointly funds 79 job coaches with 70 local school systems across the state. During the 2000-2001 school year, ADRS provided \$1.3 million of funding and the 70 local school systems provided \$1.2 million for the jointly funded job coaches (Boswell, 2001).

The rehabilitation agency also has made a serious commitment to providing employment services to transition youths for more than a decade. Since 1987, the number of transition students (students served

by ADRS while in school) has increased by 52%, and successful placements of these students into employment increased by more than 245% (Boswell, 2001). State data has also shown that each year ADRS transition counselors serve almost 7,000 students with disabilities who are enrolled in Alabama's local high schools.

The service coordination component of the Multi-Agency Transition Project provided by Mental Health/Mental Retardation provided a service coordinator (case manager) to broker and coordinate service and supports for participants with disabilities and their families. The service coordinator maintained a student/family-centered focus. Services and supports accessed and monitored by the service coordinators/case managers were based on a plan which reflected the assessed capabilities, needs, preferences, and choices of the individual and was developed in collaboration with family, other agencies, and service providers. Following a person-centered, enablement approach, the service coordinator/case manager focused on assisting the individual in making personal choices and in identifying and assessing services and supports leading to a satisfying and normative community life style.

Supported Employment

In October 1994, the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) was awarded a three year, \$1.5 million State Systems Change Grant for Supported Employment by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. Supported employment facilitates competitive work in integrated settings for people with the most severe disabilities by providing intensive onsite job-site training and on-going job maintenance supports. Alabama's systems change grant, Project Rise, was designed to improve services by implementing nine specific goals to address the state's identified barriers to supported employment. One of these goals was to improve the school-to-work transition outcomes for students with the most severe disabilities.

Over the grant's life span, numerous training opportunities and cooperative service activities were conducted between Project RISE, ADRS, local education agencies (LEAs), the Alabama State Department of Education, Auburn University, the Alabama Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, other state agencies, and parent/consumer groups. The knowledge of LEA personnel about the nature, purpose, and availability of supported employment services was increased significantly by these grant activities. More importantly, the employment expectations of LEA personnel for students with the most severe disabilities were also significantly increased. This increased expectation is resulting now in more and more students with significant disabilities being cooperatively prepared for integrated, competitive post-school employment by LEA and rehabilitation personnel.

Systems Change Grant

The driving force behind Alabama's commitment to significantly improve the employment and quality-of-life outcomes for its youth with disabilities has been the Alabama Transition Initiative (ATI). In 1996, the Alabama Transition Initiative, a five-year systems change grant, was funded for \$2.3 million by the U.S.

Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Sound, capacity-building steps were taken through this statewide initiative to improve and expand the State's system for providing transition services to youth and young adults with disabilities. ATI's ultimate goal was to provide and sustain student-centered transition planning and implementation at the local community level. The five initiatives which provided the infrastructure for ATI's activities were (a) local program/service, (b) interagency, (c) post-school linkage, (d) training and dissemination, and (e) student tracking. Each of these initiatives is reviewed below.

The cornerstone of the Alabama Transition Initiative was the local program/service initiative. The purpose of this initiative was to assist local education agencies and their communities to implement proven effective transition practices that result in positive post-school adult outcomes. Model transition demonstration programs were created in 47 local education agencies across Alabama between 1996 and 2001. Each demonstration site implemented a full array of transition services, including a community transition team, self-advocacy activities, functional curricula, local job market analysis, job coach services, and a student tracking system, and received training and technical assistance from a variety of state and university sources. Each of the other four initiatives was specifically targeted at these model demonstration sites.

The interagency initiative was designed to create and/or strengthen partnerships between local education agencies and the service provider agencies that served their students with disabilities. Through this initiative, barriers to effective services were examined, and local/state policies and procedures were developed or modified to reduce these barriers. The intent was to create a more coordinated, seamless system for ensuring that students with disabilities received transition services when they were needed.

The post-school linkage initiative created linkages between students and post-school adult outcomes, including employment and postsecondary education. Students were connected with community job resources and locally-based job coach services. Also, a higher education planning consortium on transition services was created.

Through the training and dissemination initiative, a comprehensive transition training and technical assistance program was implemented. The components included in-service training, technical assistance, distance education, materials development, and special training academies. Training was provided to the full cadre of transition stakeholders (students, parents, education personnel, service providers, employers, and the general public).

Finally, the goal of the student tracking initiative was to identify the actual outcomes of Alabama's students with disabilities after their exit from school. With this knowledge and understanding, more appropriate and effective policy and practice decisions could be made at the state, local school, and individual student level by education and agency leaders.

In 1999, the Alabama Transition Initiative was recognized by the National Transition Alliance for Youth with Disabilities (NTA) as one of the most exemplary transition programs in the United States. This award

is presented to promising programs and practices that promoted post-school outcomes for students with disabilities through inclusive school-to-work systems. This honor reflects the quality of services and best practices being implemented by ATI's Demonstration Sites distributed throughout the state.

Alabama Occupational Diploma

In May 1997, the Alabama State Board of Education adopted the Alabama Occupational Diploma as a diploma option for students with disabilities in all high schools in Alabama. The need for the development of this diploma program was recognized formally in 1995 with the establishment of the Task Force to Revise Graduation Requirements. This Task Force's discussion of higher graduation requirements and its impact for students with disabilities raised many unanswered questions and concerns.

Several compelling reasons that emphasized the necessity for the creation of an alternate diploma program were cited in 1996 during a series of statewide meetings that sought public input on this issue. First, almost 40 percent of the students with disabilities who exited the public school system in the 1995-1996 school year dropped out of school or their status was unknown. Many parents, educators and service providers believed that some of these students would have chosen to remain in high school with the availability of a graduation option offering relevant academic and community experiences and employment training.

Second, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) now required, in each student's IEP, transition services that address the transition activity areas of instruction, community experiences, employment and training, post-school adult living, and, when appropriate, functional vocational evaluation and daily living skills. The need for a diploma option that provided a flexible structure for local school systems to meet the transition needs of youth with disabilities was frequently expressed.

Third, each year since the 1993-1994 school year, less than 18 percent of all students with disabilities who exited the public school systems had received the Alabama High School Diploma. In 1996, new course requirements for high school graduation were adopted that increased the total credits from 20 to 24 with 16 in the core subjects of math, science, English, and social studies, and provided much more rigorous course content (e.g., Algebra and Geometry in the area of math) to receive the general diploma. With the new rigorous graduation course requirements and the 11th grade level graduation exam, many more students with disabilities would be unable to complete the requirements for an Alabama High School Diploma and would be left with no viable exit option.

Considering the high dropout rates, the distressing realities of unemployment, and the need for a more effective vehicle for providing transition services, it became imperative that a viable exit option be implemented for many secondary students with disabilities. Responding to the high level of statewide support for the creation of a diploma program, an Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) Task Force was formed in May 1996 to draft a curriculum framework and implementation procedures for the proposed Alabama Occupational Diploma.

By the end of summer in 1996, a curricula content composed of instructional strands and content standards was developed in the following four curriculum areas: Employment English, Job Skills Math, Life Skills Science, and Career Preparation (Social Studies). The Task Force consulted national leaders (i.e., Drs. Brolin, Browning, Halpern, Halloran, Clark, and Meers) and documents in the field of transition services to create the curriculum. Printed resources used to develop this curriculum included the Alabama Courses of Study, Project TASSEL, the Life Centered Career Education Curriculum, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, and the Jobs for American Graduates. The intentional goal of this diploma program is to prepare students with disabilities to enter the workforce and earn competitive wages.

The Alabama Occupational Diploma curricula program was piloted in the 1996-1997 school year in seven local school systems. Based on the successful piloting of the program, the State Board of Education, on May 8, 1997, adopted the Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD). Students with disabilities now have four options concerning a course of study: (a) the Alabama High School Diploma or an Alabama High School Diploma with Advanced Academic Endorsement, (b) the Alabama Occupational Diploma, (c) the Alternate Adult High School Diploma, and (d) the Graduation Certificate.

In summary, the multi-faceted program of study leading to the awarding of the Alabama Occupational Diploma is designed to meet the mandates from both federal and state legislation, as well as incorporate "best practices" utilized in delivering transition services. The Alabama Occupational Diploma incorporates Career/Technical Education standards that will enable students to acquire and maintain the necessary competencies and skills needed to secure and retain competitive employment. This option also provides for meaningful inclusion and instruction of students with disabilities in the community and the workplace. The Alabama Occupational Diploma offers an exit avenue that prepares students with disabilities for a productive and contributing adulthood as fully participating members of the communities in which they reside.

A Partnership with Higher Education

During the past decade, Auburn University and the faculty of the Rehabilitation and Special Education Department (RSED) have provided state leadership in the transition of youth and young adults with disabilities, including the securing of nearly \$5 million extramural dollars in grants and contracts for transition-related activities. Most of these dollars have been nationally competitive grants awarded from the U.S. Department of Education. Since 1992, for example, Auburn University has received over one million dollars to develop and implement a master's program for preparing secondary special education teachers with an emphasis on transition. As of this writing, a total of 49 teacher specialists in transition have graduated and assumed positions in the public school system.

In 1997, Auburn University was awarded a three-year grant to develop a distance education program in transition. As of this writing, 87 transition stakeholders from throughout Alabama have satisfactorily completed this 10-week course. Also, Auburn University was awarded a four-year doctoral grant which includes preparing Ph.D. graduates as national leaders in transition. In addition to these programs, all

rehabilitation and special education students must complete required courses in transition. Finally, since 1992, RSED faculty have authored 29 publications on transition, including 2 books, 7 book chapters, 6 conference proceedings, and 14 articles published in state and nationally refereed periodicals.

Research

Considerable research attention has been directed to the area of transition in Alabama. Such studies range from intervention effects of teaching social problem-solving skills to secondary students, to exploring the significance of transition-related values with Alabama stakeholders, to the opinions and practices of school-based rehabilitation counselors, to statewide-wide studies designed to address the current status of transition programs, services, and practices. Sixteen such studies are presented in this Special Issue (see paper entitled *A Window to Research on Transition in Alabama*).

In all cases, these studies examined some aspect of transition in Alabama (e.g., problems, programs, practices, providers). The investigators all resided in Alabama, as did the subjects. And, all but one of the 16 manuscripts were documented in an Alabama resource, such as (a) the Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children Journal, (b) unpublished doctoral dissertations from Auburn University and the University of Alabama, and (c) published documents from the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute. In essence, the research reported here reflects the focus of this special issue, which is – Transition in Alabama! (p.1)

Summary

In summary, many and varied transition initiatives have been developed in Alabama to improve and expand the State's system for providing quality transition programs and services to its youth and young adults with disabilities. Particular attention has been given to developments made in the 1990s. Efforts to effectively operationalize transition services at the local school level led to funded incentive grants for school and community-based work experiences, the development of model transition demonstration sites, increased supportive employment opportunities, the creation of an alternative diploma option, increased partnerships with adult provider agencies and higher education, greatly increased professional development opportunities, and a significant effort to conduct research directed to the area of transition.

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Browning, P.L., Cox, C.A., Rabren, K., & Tew-Washburn, S. (2001). *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research*. Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (Available from 1228 Haley Center, Transition Leadership Institute, Auburn University, AL 36849)
