

Transition Leadership: Special Education Administrators Support College-Based Transition Services

By Maria Paiewonsky and Shahrzad Sajadi

Emerging across the United States are transition programs for students with intellectual disability (ID) set on college campuses. These transition services are helping students to pursue their postsecondary education, employment, and independent living goals. For students who are eligible for transition services extending beyond the typical four years of high school, this is an opportunity to further their education and academic skills, explore career interests, and learn and socialize amongst their peers in an age-appropriate setting. Because of the increased expectations for students with ID to attend college and obtain competitive employment, these transition programs are expanding, and to be successful they rely on good collaboration between high schools and colleges.

Special education administrators have a significant role in bringing vision, expectations, and practical planning to these partnerships to create what are now called college-based transition services (CBTS) programs. Also known as inclusive dual or concurrent enrollment programs, CBTS programs provides a framework for special education administrators to not only meet state and federal guidelines for results-oriented transition services (IDEA, 2007), but also to prepare students for further education, employment, and independent living.

In this brief, we offer the perspectives of special education administrators from two states, Massachusetts and Indiana, who have been engaged in CBTS for up to 10 years. Each has had extensive experience overseeing college-based transition services in collaboration with their college partners. We hope their voices and insights will inspire more special education administrators to support the students they serve to access transition services in college-based settings. Through two conversations, a webinar in fall 2019 and a follow-up discussion in summer 2020, special education administrators shared their perspectives on college-based transition services.

Special Education Administrators Interviewed

Angela Balsley

Executive Director
Earlywood Educational Services
Franklin, Indiana
abalsley@earlywood.org

Lisa Graham

Director, Grant County Special Education Cooperative
Impact Program, Indiana Wesleyan University
Marion, Indiana
lisa_graham@olemiss.k12.in.us

April K. Rist

Statewide System of Support Assistance Lead
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and
Secondary Education
Boston, Massachusetts
aprilrist@gmail.com

Theresa Skinner

Director of Special Services
Easton Public Schools
Easton, MA
tskinner@easton.k12.ma.us

Paul Tzovolos

Director of Student Services
Bridgewater-Raynham Regional School District
Bridgewater, Massachusetts
ptzovolos@bridge-rayn.org

The conversation also included one program coordinator who supports students receiving college-based transition services through the Inspire Program at Franklin College in Indiana:

Stephanie Lawless

Assistant Director, Earlywood Educational Services
Franklin, Indiana
slawless@earlywood.org

BENEFITS OF CBTS SERVICES

One of the many responsibilities special education administrators are charged with is the oversight of compliance for transition services. In this position, administrators set the tone for high expectations and post-school outcomes that meet student and family needs, as well as their district's college and career readiness goals. The participants indicated they had all taken a lead with CBTS services and agreed the *benefits* of student participation in these services cannot be overstated. They highlighted several key benefits listed below.

- Age-appropriate setting for students 18+
- Authentic learning environment for post-high-school students
- Access to peers
- Noted changes in self-esteem, independent living skills
- Increased exposure to jobs and work opportunities
- Increase in self-determination and self-advocacy skills

Theresa Skinner stated,

"The most important thing is to remember that we want our students to be with age-appropriate peers. If a student at 14 years old comes to the high school, we don't want them sitting at high school with somebody who is 19 or 21 or 22 years old. But we also don't want that 21- or 22-year-old to be in the same classroom with the same staff members for eight years. We all want to be with people that we are familiar with and that are interested in the same type of things. That's why the college option is so important, in my opinion."

Skinner also indicated CBTS services can help students prepare for their futures:

"We want to expand their world and their opportunities in an authentic environment. To me, it's been probably one of the greatest things to see how they come to view themselves in a different way and set goals for themselves and aspire to do greater things than they would have before. Because they were given this opportunity on a college campus."

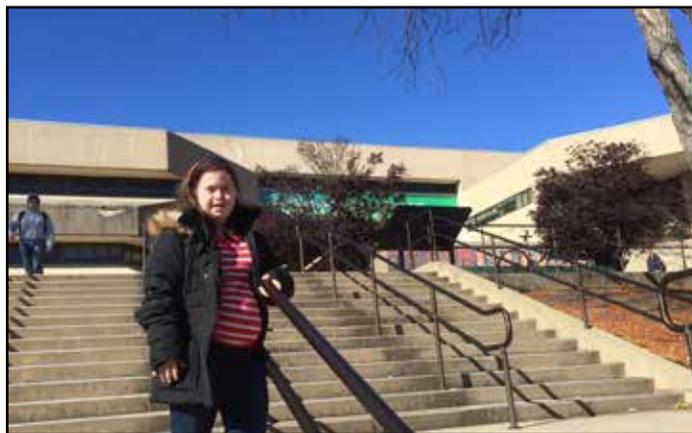
You can't generalize unless you are able to access the natural environment. For 18- to 22-year-olds, for many, that's college.

—Angela Balsley, Earlywood Educational Services

After students with ID start college, transition staff began to observe changes. Students started demonstrating levels of self-determination and independence that were not as apparent in high school settings. Adjusting to the routines of daily campus life, students assumed the responsibility to get to classes, complete assignments, and talk to their instructors. They also learned to schedule their own campus routines.

As April Rist explained, student benefits are observed in a variety of ways.

"I have seen students grow tremendously in so many ways—communication, life skills, happiness—all from being exposed to the opportunities that they can only get at college. There's really nothing that can compare to that and this is the first time that these students have been able to have access to those types of college experiences."



April Lucia, student, Holyoke Community College

Changes also occurred in students when they realized they're part of a college community. Paul Tzovolos added the college experience also gives students a sense of pride and a sense of accomplishment in moving forward that students who remain solely in-district don't always have.

"I love seeing my students on the BSU campus wearing their Bridgewater State University

hoodies and using their campus cards and really taking pride that they're on the college campus with a lot of their peers who've graduated alongside them."

Like many college students, students enrolled through CBTS programs also have opportunities to be exposed to more career opportunities. Lisa Graham highlighted how students in CBTS programs are more exposed to the world of work.

"They're getting it—exposure to different types of folks in different types of work experiences that they wouldn't have had while they are still in high school."

These administrators also recognized the opportunities students with ID are offered to meet transition and postsecondary goals on a college campus. Examples included learning how to use accommodations, asserting more independence, enhancing social development skills, and increasing independent living skills. Skinner shared,

"Ultimately, that is the goal. Preparing them for life and how to go out into the world and function productively and contribute to our society in a very positive way. And that's

Whether they are approached by the college or are the one to reach out, having a partnership with mutual goals to support students with ID is critical to the success of college-based transition services.

what I see these programs really helping to support kids to be able to do that much more effectively."

The administrators also noted the influence students with disabilities have on campus diversity, which benefits any higher education community. They agreed students with ID are accepted as part of the broadening definition of "college student." In turn, that acceptance contributes to building an inclusive and diverse campus culture. Graham stated,

"I think it's so important for the people at the college level to also understand the inclusivity of having students with disabilities on campus."

INITIAL BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

Developing innovative transition services takes time, extended planning, and problem solving, and special education administrators play an important role in facilitating this planning. The administrators interviewed shared a number of barriers they needed to address:

- Approaching a college or university to establish CBTS services
- Alleviating concerns of stakeholders
- Comprehensive planning
- Hiring and training transition staff
- Communicating with all stakeholders

Approaching a college or university to establish CBTS services

Special education administrators play an important role in establishing a CBTS program with a local college or university. Whether they are approached by the college or are the one to reach out, having a partnership with mutual goals to support students with ID is critical to the success of college-based transition services. Graham said,

"One barrier that we had was just getting our foot in the university door. I have worked with students with disabilities at the secondary level for almost 30 years and it was my dream 30 years ago to get [students with ID] on the campus. It took until seven years ago for that dream to become a reality because people don't completely understand what your goal is and why it's important."

Alleviating concerns of stakeholders

Additionally, administrators offered advice about being prepared for the questions potential college partners might have. Skinner explained,

"I think when we started down this journey you could see the worry and the fear from the staff at the college campus, because they had never done this before and they weren't sure. But the beauty is that we were partnering with them and all of the staff from the district said, 'We do this every day. This is what we do, we make adaptations. We make things accessible to students.' So, the silver lining was that teamwork and coming together created a beautiful collaboration."

Comprehensive planning

Developing CBTS services takes time and ongoing planning. Administrators need to consider how school policies, staffing, and budgeting should be adjusted. Developing services also takes ongoing communication with district stakeholders whose support is critical. Administrators have an important role in leading these activities and communicating their importance to district leaders such as school superintendents. They also have to be prepared to respond to some initial concerns that might come up, such as liability issues relating to student safety on campus and funding.

Angela Balsley reflected,

"I believe that one of the biggest challenges is the funding for it. As our budgets get tighter, I know that I have to continue to advocate about the importance of the program to our superintendents and our school districts. I think that a lot of directors I know would love to have a program like this. I think we all can agree on the benefits but, to me, the funding really comes down as the biggest challenge and secondary to that is liability. We've had to work through issues of being a transition program on a college campus. Where do the liabilities fall? This is another challenge for people looking to start one of these programs to work through."

Administrators often find themselves painting a picture of what CBTS services are and why it's so important to budget for more innovative transition services for students with disabilities. Graham indicated that as the director of a special education cooperative this was especially challenging.

"I have five superintendents. Because we're a co-op, we have five high school districts that feed into this program, and they [are] my bosses. I have to try to convince them and help them understand how important transition is and that students go to school well beyond the age of 18. To sit in a high school class for eight or nine years is just not appropriate, they [students] aren't learning to interact and be social with their peers of equal age. That was tricky, but now that we do it, and they see it, and they experience it with the students, I don't think anybody would look back. But initially it was a scary thought for them."

Hiring and training transition staff

Hiring transition staff with the communication and leadership skills to prepare students for enrollment in CBTS services is critical. These specialist positions require multitasking, as well as effective communication and collaboration with college partners, students, staff, and parents. Rist shared,

"I think one of the most difficult things is hiring the right person to oversee and manage the program. You have to have the right person who can communicate effectively and efficiently and who can manage other adults because it's not a typical teaching position. It's really working with other adults and making sure that you have someone who can effectively train the staff who are working on campuses with students. You really have to invest the time and money in training staff and training them well. And that's not always easy to coordinate. You have to have an onboarding process that's very different for students who are participating in this program. That is a little bit more intensive than if you're just hiring a staff person to work in a building."

Regarding training topics, Graham said that one important key concept is understanding that this model of transition services goes beyond traditional transition services.

"We have to readjust our thinking [and remember] that the students are adults. We have to treat them like adults in adult environments." Tzovolos noted that staffing is key because student support is critical. "We found that a huge crux of the success for our students was focusing on having a job coach that was flexible and put structures in place and fostered the independent skills and vocational skills for the students on campus. They foster independence for students while still providing the backbone of support for them."

"You don't have to reinvent the wheel because there's a lot of programs that already exist. We are happy to share our resources and experience."

—Angela Balsley, Earlywood Educational Services

Communicating with all stakeholders

The school administrators also shared the adjustments that need to be made for Individual Education Programs (IEPs). As Rist explained,

“The students and families really had to readjust their thinking around vision setting, goal setting, and the IEP process. That, I think, is the biggest obstacle, even 10 years later. We are still are trying to get the word out there and communicate with families and students that this is a different way of thinking about special education services.”

ADVICE FOR GETTING STARTED

When developing college-based transition services, there are a few agreed-upon first steps:

- Communicate the opportunity to all potential stakeholders
- Consider how to reallocate existing resources
- Be proactive with budget planning
- Prepare students, families, and staff for this opportunity
- Collaborate with adult agency staff
- Reach out to colleagues who are doing this work

Communicating this new model of transition services is important and all information about these innovative services should be shared with a range of potential stakeholders, from students and families, to the broad range of school staff including school principals, guidance counselors, teachers, and instructional assistants. Graham suggested communicating about the option in IEP meetings and parent meetings so that everyone is hearing the same information. This approach gives parents the opportunity to express any apprehensions or concerns. At the same time, the special education administrator has the chance to promote the experiences they anticipate students having, including increased understanding of their own self-advocacy and the transition to age-appropriate social environments.

Regarding resources, Tzovolos recommended working within systems that are available to administrators to allocate or re-allocate resources to these students.

“A year in advance I allocate funds out of my out-of-district special education budget toward the tuitions for at least two students

to participate in the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI). Additionally, I hold a full instructional assistant position each year to support students at college. When we’re making our staffing assignments, I make sure that I hold that position in queue as part of the assignments, to make sure that I have someone on campus to be able to support these students.”

Balsley also suggested making clear how current funds can support CBTS programs.

“I also try to help superintendents see how existing funding supports it. We look at the allocations that we receive for each of these students individually, and I try to keep the program costs within those allocations. So, for example, if we receive \$9,000 per student, I tried to keep the cost under that so it’s not going to cost us anything extra.”

Finally, to sustain this model of CBTS services, administrators recommended constantly keeping inclusive practices at the forefront, maintaining open communication and collaboration with partners, and connecting with others who are doing this work. Tzovolos suggested school administrators are in a good position to engage multiple stakeholders.

“This is what we want for students so we can agree that this is the best way to get there. It helps to initiate the conversation. I also would say that starting early with your connections to adult service agencies, your discussions about what the vision is for a student and focusing on a strength-based perspective really helps.”

As for those early communications with college staff, Balsley recommended, “It is really

“...the beauty is that we were partnering with them and all of the staff from the district said, ‘We do this every day. This is what we do, we make adaptations. We make things accessible to students.’ So, the silver lining was that teamwork and coming together created a beautiful collaboration.”

—Theresa Skinner, Easton Public Schools

important to collaborate with college personnel, especially when you're starting the programs. You've got to really be sensitive in building those relationships, understanding from their perspective as a college, what's working well for them, where their struggles are, and what kind of image they want to project."

One last tip recommended by the group is to reach out and visit programs already in place. As Balsey advised,

"You don't have to reinvent the wheel because there's a lot of programs that already exist. We are happy to share our resources and experience."

CONCLUSION/FINAL THOUGHTS

College-based transition services is a growing field, and the interest from students, families, and transition and college personnel to expand these opportunities is clear. For special education administrators, transition staff, and college program staff, there are many ways to take first steps and many resources to support these efforts.

To learn more about college-based transition services, visit www.Thinkcollege.net. To find out about Massachusetts' inclusive dual enrollment work, visit the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative at www.mass.edu/strategic/maicei.asp. For more on Indiana's inclusive college programs, visit the Indiana Postsecondary Education Coalition at www.thinkcollegeindiana.org/index.php.



Bridgewater State University Partnership includes college staff, transition and special education staff, and family representatives.

REFERENCE

Graham, L., Rist, A., Skinner, T., Tzovolos, P. & Balsey, A. (2019). Administrators Can Think College. Think College Webinar Series. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion. Retrieved at: <https://thinkcollege.net/resource/college-based-transition-services-cbts/administrators-can-think-college-webinar-resources>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MARIA PAIEWONSKY, Ed.D. is a Program Manager and Transition Specialist at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

SHAHRZAD SAJADI, MA is a PhD Candidate and Research Assistant at the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development, University of Massachusetts Boston.

INSIGHT, Issue No. 46, 2020

INSIGHT is a publication of Think College, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. This brief was developed with funding from the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative.

Recommended citation for this brief: Paiewonsky, M. & Shahrzad, S. (2020). *Transition Leadership: Special Education Administrators Support College-Based Transition Services*. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 46, Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.



www.thinkcollege.net
www.facebook.com/thinkcollege