When Will Our Values Finally Result in the Creation of New Pathways for Change—Change That We Can Believe In?

Frank R. Rusch and Pamela Wolfe
The Pennsylvania State University

We've heard the grim statistic. Despite efforts over the past several decades to improve the delivery of transition services for youth with disabilities, outcomes continue to be unacceptably dismal for most youth, including high rates of unemployment (exceeding 70%), residential independence (99% living with parents), and financial dependence (most living in poverty), concurrent with low rates of enrollment in college or other postsecondary education alternatives (less than 1% of the entire population of persons with severe disabilities; cf. Rusch, 2008).

In their article detailing their vision for critically needed legislative and service change, Certo et al. (2008) asked very little of us as professionals—simply that “...the day after graduation... look no different than the day before” for individuals with severe disabilities who are exiting high school (p. 17). In other words, they ask our profession to close the “…wasteful policy gap...” (p. 31) that exists due to a lack of cohesion of publicly funded services related to transition for individuals with severe disabilities. Why then, when so little is asked of us, does our learning curve continue to be flat lining? What evidence do we need to fully convince us that change is needed—change that we can believe in?

Certo et al. (2008) remind us that adult day care, work activity programs, and sheltered workshops continue to thrive despite excessive costs concomitant with poor outcomes and in direct opposition to our social values, which call for integration of transitioning youth into typical employment settings, not segregated work setting. Thus, one of the most important messages that Certo et al. delivered is that our combined efforts to promote integrated employment and postsecondary education outcomes for individuals having severe disabilities after they receive an education in our public high schools are no more successful today than they were 30 years ago (Rusch, 2008). That is, we continue to miss the mark in our quest to ensure that adolescents, after completing high school, become employed or pursue further education and live and participate meaningfully in their communities.

However, Certo et al. (2008) did not just remind us of our failures. They suggest a blueprint for change. Specifically, the authors call for explicit statements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, permitting school districts to subcontract with appropriate private agencies at the point of transition and call for amendments to the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (2000). We agree with the authors that such change is needed to provide long-term support for individuals with severe disabilities after exiting high schools.

To substantiate their recommendations, Certo et al. (2008) reported data on the Transition Services Integration Model, which exemplifies successful efforts to promote employment after high school. Specifically, 177 students found employment because of customized employment and working with nonschool agencies that provided long-term support. Inarguably, these are impressive outcomes.

Certo et al. (2008) emphasized how difficult it is to leave entitlement programs as youth age out of our publicly funded high schools and enter the eligibility-based morass of adult-focused legislation, where they frequently face waiting lists for services and exiting students and their families typically rely on their own resources to understand a diverse and confusing array of adult services. We believe that Certo et al. are saying that we must get past discussions about valued outcomes and begin to address our failure to influence new legislation that focuses on continued coordination that supports youth beyond high school participation. We wholeheartedly agree.

However, even with a blueprint or a model, accountability in the transition process is paramount. That is, we need accountability from schools and adult service agencies for outcome-based results that reflect our shared values. As pointed out by Rusch Hughes, Agran, Martin, and Johnson (2009), the focus of transition services continues to be disproportionately focused on identifying an outcome as opposed to guaranteeing that outcome. Consequently, high schools are not being held...
accountable for providing an education that results in students with severe disabilities continuing their employment or education after high school. In short, the outcomes of education that have been provided to students with severe disabilities continue to miss the mark. Without accountability, no one educational or agency entity has to answer for poor outcomes. But the buck must stop somewhere. We believe it must stop with both high schools and adult service agencies recognizing that valued outcomes must be supported.

To attain successful transition outcomes, a new definition of transition is warranted. Such a definition must highlight accountability from high schools and adult service agencies for outcome-based results that reflect shared societal values. We believe that the outcomes of our schooling should result in all youth, between the ages of 14 and 22 years, knowing where they are going to work or continue their education after completing high school, and that high schools must coordinate post-placement support that results in these youth remaining employed or continuing their education.

Legislation must be amended to be more explicit about the outcomes that we value. We realize that those outcomes will vary, as some youth will want to work in the service industries, some in retail, and others will want to continue their education. New bridges must be constructed to promote these outcomes (Rusch et al., 2009). Briefly, these bridges include (a) teaching and promoting student participation in decisions about jobs or additional schooling that hold value to them; (b) schools being held accountable for placing students in these jobs or postsecondary education institutions; and (c) schools orchestrating the coordinated services and support that are important to ensure long-term employment as well as employment after postsecondary schooling is completed.

Certo et al. (2008) presented us with a sober reminder of how far we have come and yet how far we have to go to meet the established values of the community of students, parents, teachers, and others who collectively unite behind TASH. We have a long way to go in our collective understanding of the value of integration versus segregation.

Compounding matters, current entitlements are vague in identifying valued outcomes. These outcomes must become the explicit goals of all high schools: That all youth, including those with severe disabilities, are entitled to make choices, to work, and to receive the support that result in dreams realized. Certo et al. (2008) provided direction and proof that valued transition outcomes are possible when we have a pathway that leads to and supports those outcomes. Let us all start down the path.

References


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, 20 U. S. C. 1400 et seq.


Received: January 7, 2008
Final Acceptance: January 7, 2008
Editor in Charge: Martin Agran