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Utilizing Vocational Rehabilitation to Support Post-School Transition for Students With Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

In addition to supporting the academic goals of students with learning disabilities, secondary special education teachers are tasked with providing services designed to improve post-school outcomes. To improve these offerings, special education teachers should ensure collaboration with vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors during the transition process. Vocational rehabilitation counselors have unique knowledge for preparing individuals with learning disabilities to be successful in the workplace. Partnering with VR counselors may improve post-school goal acquisition for students. This article describes VR service mandates and provides recommendations for special education teachers to build relationships with VR personnel.

Keywords

learning disabilities, special education, post-school transition, vocational rehabilitation, WIOA, collaboration

Mr. Alonso is a high school special education teacher at a rural school where he primarily works with students with high incidence disabilities, most of whom have a specific learning disability (LD). Although he is confident in his ability to support the academic needs of his students, Mr. Alonso knows that he is also responsible for providing instruction and experiences to help his students reach post-school goals related to training, employment, community participation, and independent living. Because most of his training focused on developing academic skills, Mr. Alonso is unsure how best to support his students as they work to achieve their individualized post-school goals. In the past, he has worked with a local vocational rehabilitation counselor, who mostly attended individualized education program (IEP) meetings to meet students as they prepared to graduate. After attending a regional training on transition, he became aware of the increased involvement of vocational rehabilitation and wondered if a counselor could help provide services (See Note 1).

In addition to providing academic supports and instruction to youth with disabilities, high school special education teachers are tasked with delivering transition-related services that target individualized student post-school goals (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004). Although this is true for all students receiving special education services, it may be particularly

important for students with LD as they constitute the largest disability category in K-12 special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Students with LD may be enrolled in similar courses as their peers without disabilities, yet experience worse post-school outcomes (Sanford et al., 2011). Looking specifically at employment, a prominent measure of post-school success, individuals with LD are employed at far lower rates than those without disabilities (46% compared to 81%; Strauser, 2013).

The transition from school to work, or from secondary to postsecondary education, is a dynamic process allowing students with LD to engage in activities designed to determine their vocational goals. The population of students with LD is varied and includes many unique learning, behavioral, and social characteristics and this transition represents a time of uncertainty and stress. Due to the nature of the

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disability, individuals with LD will continue to be impacted as they enter post-secondary education and employment.

Although vocational exploration and instruction may be delivered within the context of the school-based curriculum using school employees, special education teachers may enlist the help of other stakeholders to support their efforts. Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015) described interagency collaboration as representatives of various organizations gathering to collectively achieve more than they could on their own. Interagency collaboration is a hallmark of secondary special education services and is prevalent in literature related to post-school transition. For example, Kohler et al. (2016) included interagency collaboration as one of the five primary domains of transition programming. Collaborative service planning and provision between schools, VR, employment services, and other community partners has been shown to be a predictor of positive post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities (Fabian et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009).

Vocational Rehabilitation

Although interagency collaboration can involve any number of entities working with school personnel to provide transition services, a common partner is the local vocational rehabilitation (VR) office. Transition planning is mandated for educators in IDEA (2004) and for VR counselors in the Rehabilitation Act and its Amendments (PL 102-569). Vocational rehabilitation is a federal-state program committed to assisting people with disabilities obtain and maintain employment. In 1981, VR explicitly included LD as a condition eligible for VR services (Sheldon & Prout, 1985). Opportunities to collaborate with VR became more prevalent following the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014), legislation that guides services offered by VR in a similar manner as how the IDEA (2004) directs special education services. Recognizing that employment-related training and vocational services for youth with disabilities before they exit high school can result in improved employment outcomes, WIOA (2014) requires state VR agencies spend at least 15% of their total budget on pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS). There are five specific Pre-ETS activities dictated in the WIOA: (a) job exploration counseling, (b) work based learning experiences, (c) workplace readiness training to develop appropriate social skills, (d) transition counseling regarding post-secondary education and comprehensive programs, and (e) self-advocacy instruction (WIOA, 2014).

Pre-employment transition services are designated specifically for school-aged students with disabilities and do not require students to apply for VR services; it is only required that they be potentially eligible for VR services (i.e., having a disability that causes a barrier to obtaining or maintaining employment). Students who receive special

education services through IDEA are likely eligible. Although Pre-ETS services are available to students with disabilities, VR counselors may struggle to collaborate with secondary special education teachers to provide Pre-ETS. In a national study of over 200 secondary transition teachers, only 29% stated they provide student information to VR counselors and invite them to IEP meetings (Taylor et al., 2016).

Benefits of Vocational Rehabilitation Involvement

Theobald et al. (2019) found that students with LD who were enrolled in some type of career and technical education in secondary education had a greater likelihood of employment following graduation. Another study found that youth with LD who received an average of four VR services were four times as likely to obtain employment when compared to peers with LD receiving only one VR service (Poppen et al., 2017). The initiation of VR service provision to youth well ahead of their high school graduation contributes to greater likelihood the student will have a successful closure from the VR process (e.g., be working in a job; Honeycutt et al., 2014).

It is well established that enrollment in postsecondary education, regardless of the type (e.g., vocational, technical, traditional) can provide individuals with a pathway to a successful career and financial independence (Shaw & Dukes, 2013). However, students with LD enroll in post-secondary education at lower rates, and of those who do attend graduate at lower rates than their typical peers (Joshi & Bouck, 2017). Students with LD attend vocational, technical, and 2 year or community colleges at greater rates than their peers without disabilities; however, they attend 4-year colleges at lower rates (Joshi & Bouck, 2017; Sanford et al., 2011). Youth with LD who have been involved in the VR system and have post-secondary educational experience have higher rates of employment and earnings compared to peers without a VR connection or postsecondary education (Whittenburg et al., 2020).

Barriers to Effective Collaboration With Vocational Rehabilitation

Although current literature regarding transition for students with LD demonstrates better post-school outcomes for students working with VR counselors (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009), there are significant barriers to effective collaboration between school-based special educators and VR counselors. Most professionals involved in the collaborative transition process have received limited training on strategies to establish and maintain these professional relationships (Mazzotti & Plotner, 2016).

Table 1. Additional Resources to Support Collaboration With Vocational Rehabilitation.

Resource	Description
National Technical Assistance on Transition (NTACT) Interagency Agreement Toolkit https://transitionta.org/interagencytoolkit	NTACT provides practitioners with a large number of valuable resources to support the post-school success of students with disabilities. The Interagency Agreement Toolkit is one of many practitioner-friendly resources available at no cost to professionals who support post-school transition.
Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC) http://www.wintac.org	WINTAC is mostly for VR professionals, however special education teachers can use the website to better understand VR services and mandates. School-based personnel may use these resources to better understand WIOA.
Transition Coalition: Interagency Collaboration Online Module https://transitioncoalition.org/blog/id-intro-page/ Mazzotti and Rowe (2015)	Transition Coalition offers excellent resources for secondary special education teachers. They have no-cost online modules that cover a variety of topics, including one on Interagency Collaboration. Although not specifically focused on VR, this book provides guidance on how to develop teams to support youth transitioning to adulthood. It is focused on providing step-by-step guidance to practitioners.
Noonan (2014)	This book is designed to provide practitioners with strategies to develop relationships with representatives from other agencies (including VR) to help support positive post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities.

Note. VR = vocational rehabilitation; WIOA = Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Secondary special education teachers may have limited knowledge of interagency collaboration, may not deliver transition-related activities, and have little or no specific knowledge regarding their school's utilization of interagency collaboration focused on transition (Benitez et al., 2009; Sprunger et al., 2018). One study exploring secondary special educator's collaboration with VR described teachers not understanding when and why they should refer their students for VR services (Pacheco et al., 2020). Because of the passage of WIOA and the ongoing VR policy changes around Pre-ETS, secondary special educators admit confusion around current Pre-ETS practices. Beyond the educators' knowledge of VR, many secondary students with disabilities were not aware of VR or its purpose (Collier et al., 2017).

The lack of understanding in the collaborative relationship between secondary special educators and VR counselors goes both ways. One study showed that almost a quarter of VR counselors surveyed did not know what was expected of them in a transition planning meeting (Oertle et al., 2013). In addition, that same study demonstrated only 40% of VR counselors agree that their "involvement in transition is mandated by law" (Oertle et al., 2013, p. 32). Training specific to transition planning typically is not required in rehabilitation counseling master's degree programs, although some graduate programs do require some coursework on the topic.

In addition to lack of information, other barriers may relate to geographic location. Disparities in funding and inequities in the provision of public school education is impacted by geography (Tieken, 2017). This remains true for VR, with rural communities having fewer agencies to work with, lower numbers of potential employers, and more transportation issues than VR consumers experience in urban settings (Landon et al., 2019). Living in a rural community can impact

a student's future employment opportunities as rural communities often have fewer employment options, limited post-secondary education opportunities, and inadequate numbers of VR counselors serving rural areas (Lustig et al., 2004). In addition, obtaining and maintaining employment is more difficult in rural settings than in urban settings (Arnold & Seekins, 1998).

Collaboration With Vocational Rehabilitation

Collaboration is a cornerstone of special education services and a key component of providing supports for transition-aged youth with disabilities. Although school-based personnel may collaborate with a variety of individuals to support the post-school goals of students, working with VR may be especially fruitful. Vocational rehabilitation personnel may have a greater understanding of services to increase positive employment outcomes and coordination of transition services (Plotner et al., 2017). School-based practitioners may consider the following steps to develop collaborative relationships with VR counselors. For practitioners seeking additional guidance, Table 1 provides resources to support collaborative relationships.

Step 1: Start Simple

For those secondary special educators who are unaware of who or where their local VR office is, a necessary first step would be to locate and identify the VR office and counselor/s serving their school district and specific school. Typically, this information can be found easily on the state VR website, or by calling the local VR office. For those practitioners having limited interactions with VR personnel, it may

be beneficial to initiate simple and easy interactions. Especially for practitioners in rural schools who may feel isolated and not well connected with VR due to geographic proximity, it is important to remember that every location in the United States is covered by VR; every student with a disability should have access to a VR counselor.

Perhaps because of the rural location of his school, Mr. Alonso was unsure which VR counselor covered his area. After a phone call to the regional VR office, he was able to get the contact information for his counselor, Ms. Conforto. He learned that Ms. Conforto covers a large geographic region, that includes many rural schools.

Step 2: Maintain Communication

Efficient communication is at the core of effective collaboration between entities, this remains true for partnership in the transition process. While both secondary special educators and VR counselors are incredibly busy, both groups note that simply finding and spending the time to communicate and develop relationships is the number one way of improving collaboration (Taylor et al., 2016). One of the main communication concerns is the lack of understanding in *who does what* in the transition process. Secondary special educators noted frustration with the amount of overlap in the transition process when similar assessments are given to students by both the education system and the VR system. Another communication recommendation is that collaborative teams share information more frequently than just annually at the student's IEP meeting.

Mr. Alonso arranged a meeting with Ms. Conforto to learn more about VR services, including Pre-ETS. After the meeting, Mr. Alonso felt as though having the face-to-face experience with the VR counselor was fruitful. He has a deeper understanding of how VR can support his students with their job training and vocational post-school goals by supporting students in the five Pre-ETS domains. Mr. Alonso asks about the possibility of regular meetings to support his students. Although Ms. Conforto serves a large number of schools, she is able to add Mr. Alonso's school to her list of locations she regularly visits.

Step 3: Consider Specific Areas of Need

Rather than approaching VR personnel with broad "what can you do for me?" questions, it may be beneficial to complete a review of existing transition services to identify areas of need. School teams may consider using one or more of the program evaluation tool kits developed by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT, 2020). School-based practitioners should become familiar with the five Pre-ETS services areas of WIOA (i.e., described previously) to better understand how VR may be able to support student post-school goals. Both of these

practices will help schools better understand specific needs that may be able to be addressed by VR personnel.

Ms. Conforto recommended that Mr. Alonso complete a self-evaluation of his program using the Predictor Implementation Self-Assessment (an NTACT toolkit). The process made him realize that his intense focus on developing academic skills left him neglecting vocational needs of his students. He reviews results with Ms. Conforto and the two identify areas in which she is able to support his students. One significant area of need identified by the self-assessment is career awareness. Due to the rural nature of his school, there are limited opportunities for Mr. Alonso's students to understand what kinds of careers may be a good fit for them. As career awareness is included as a potential Pre-ETS service, Ms. Conforto is able to support Mr. Alonso's students identify careers that may be a good fit for them.

Step 4: Seek Trainings

Both special education teachers and VR counselors recognize that cross-disciplinary training is an essential part of collaborative relationships (Taylor et al., 2016). When compared to special education teachers, VR counselors may have a greater understanding of strategies and practices to support individualized employment goals (Plotner et al., 2017). With this in mind, school-based practitioners may request training from VR to better understand practices that improve post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. Taylor et al. (2016) found that 24% of teachers desired additional training specifically about the transition process and specific information about accessing VR. Similarly, VR personnel were interested in learning more about how the transition process looks on the education side and 26% of VR counselors indicated an interest in this area (Taylor et al., 2016). In addition, in order for such trainings to occur, there must be administrative support for cross-disciplinary training (i.e., flexibility, compensation time, paid summer training; Taylor et al., 2016). Cross-disciplinary training opportunities may help develop a relationship between school practitioners and VR counselors that will ultimately be beneficial to students as they seek employment in their desired field.

Recognizing that cross-disciplinary trainings will help each professional understand the other's role in support positive postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities, Mr. Alonso and Ms. Conforto review upcoming and archived webinars offered by both NTACT and the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC). Although they would like to do more, they recognize time limitations and agree to view a web session together once every other month.

Step 5: Formalize the Relationship

To clearly understand roles and responsibilities of the relationship between schools and VR, it may be appropriate to

develop formalized agreements. NTACT and Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC) have developed a collection of documents to help guide this process (WINTAC, 2020). In addition to providing an overview of the process, NTACT/WINTAC have identified discussion questions to help guide the development of formalized agreements between schools and VR. An additional document aims to untangle policy provisions between WIOA and IDEA, both of which include support for transition age youth with disabilities. Although informal evaluation of the agreement should be ongoing, more formal and systematic evaluations should occur annually.

Although Mr. Alonso is pleased with the support from Ms. Conforto, his school administrator is uncomfortable with an outside agency providing informal supports in the school. In order to make the arrangement more formal, Mr. Alonso suggests developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the school district and VR. The WINTAC/NTACT discussion document helps provide a foundation for the agreement, which is then signed by representatives from both parties.

Step 6: Develop and Promote Local and Regional Transition Councils

To develop productive relationships with community-based transition entities, both school-based and VR personnel should be involved with regional transition councils. A regional transition council provides an opportunity for individuals and agencies interested in supporting positive post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities to meet on a regular basis to discuss barriers, challenges, resources, events, and supports. As such, they provide an excellent platform for school-based practitioners to connect with VR personnel on a regular basis. If a local or regional group does not exist, there would be value in understanding how this platform for interagency collaboration may be developed. Although these can be informal meetings where participants share information and seek guidance from other interested parties, some transition teams may decide to be more formal with their group. Goals of the latter may include more large-scale tasks, such as addressing the need for systemic change related to policy and fiscal matters (Everson et al., 2019).

Ms. Conforto supports rural schools in a large geographic area and sees many common transition-related struggles faced by special education teachers. Mr. Alonso is curious as to how these other special education teachers address the same barriers he finds himself facing. The two decide to develop a regional transition council to provide a platform for professional networking to better support students as they work toward achieving their transition goals. Due to the large geographic area, they schedule a meeting using video conferencing to begin regular networking opportunities.

Conclusion

Secondary special education teachers may face a myriad of challenges when delivering transition services to their students. They may have limited knowledge, resources, or time to provide supports and instruction in key transition-related areas. As such, practitioners should consider recruiting VR counselors to help students with disabilities, including LD, achieve their individualized post-school goals. Although special education teachers working with VR personnel have long been part of services to support the employment goals of youth with disabilities, this partnership became more salient with the passage of WIOA (2014). This legislation requires state VR offices to allocate substantial resources to support school-aged youth. Although some schools may feel well-connected with VR, special education teachers in other school may have little contact with VR counselors. With knowledge of WIOA, an understanding of Pre-ETS service areas, and recommendations provided in this article, secondary special education teachers will be able to foster collaborative relationships with VR personnel to augment existing school-based services, ultimately benefiting students with LD.

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Note

1. The situation described in the vignettes is a fictionalized account drawn from several authentic situations and put together as an aggregated scenario.

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