Introduction to the Role of Families in Secondary Transition

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

○ What are the primary legal and historical foundations for providing transition services in schools and for adults?
○ How has the role of families within the transition process evolved?
○ What tools can schools use to evaluate and strategically plan strong parent engagement practices?

Change is constant in education and in adult service provision. As any seasoned educator or service provider will tell you, fads and gimmicks come and go, many without any substantial research base. Those who have been in the trenches for a number of years may say that if you give lip service to the latest trend, it too will pass. This publication is devoted to a “new” movement that has been a long time coming and is not likely to pass, a topic that bears serious consideration by educators and service providers: building partnerships with parents of their students or clients. Research indicates that the ultimate success of these practitioners depends on their ability to build partnerships with parents of youth with disabilities in ways that their training may not have prepared them (Epstein, 2005). There are substantial research data that link thoughtfully implemented parent partnerships with gains in student achievement and other indicators of success (Epstein, 1995, 2005; Epstein, Sanders, & Sheldon; 2007, U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The purpose of this book is to provide to practitioners, working with young adults with disabilities, information and practical strategies that will support them as they build expanded partnerships with parents during the transition years. Further, this second edition provides
frameworks for planning and evaluating school- or agency-based practices to build these partnerships.

Key Definitions

First, let us define the terms parent and family. In this publication, parent is intended in a broader sense than biological parents. We use the National PTA’s definition of parents: “the adults who play an important role in a child’s family life, since other adults—grandparents, aunts, uncles, step-parents, guardians—may carry the primary responsibility for a child’s education, development, and well-being” (National PTA, 1997, p. 5). Similarly, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) defines a parent as

(A) a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child (unless a foster parent is prohibited by State law from serving as a parent);
(B) a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State);
(C) an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare; or
(D) an individual assigned to be a surrogate parent. (20 U.S.C. §1401(23))

Although Merriam-Webster Online defines family as “the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children; . . . also: any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family” (2009a), our usage is aligned with the previous broader definitions of parents.

Merriam-Webster Online defines partnership as “a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usually involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities” (2009b). Within a practitioner–family partnership, there are a number of joint responsibilities as all parties cooperate in supporting the young adult with disabilities to make a successful transition into adult life. There are also specified responsibilities—some assumed by the school or adult service agency and others assumed by the family. The specifics of the partnership will vary with the individual’s disability, goals, and family circumstances.

Context of This Publication

We are living in the midst of a paradigm shift in the service industries regarding accountability. Educators and adult service providers historically have provided services to students or clients with their accountability measures based on whether or not the services were provided. For example, they reported simply how many students received special education services and where, or the number of young adults who completed a vocational assessment. In the new paradigm, evaluative measures focus on the results produced by these services, that is, the outcomes or “results.” This focus is at the core of recent legislation like IDEA and the No Child Left
Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which require school systems and states to report student outcome data to the federal government and make their outcomes visible to parents. As a result, schools must now report disaggregated state test scores of students receiving special education services and the number of evaluated youth who entered a career training program, as well as “customer satisfaction” with the services. This shift into an outcome context, as a result of legislative actions, has produced myriad changes in practices within the educational and adult service systems.

The Outcomes Accountability Movement

**Government Performance and Results Act of 1993**

In 1993, President Clinton signed into law the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). This act required all organizations that received federal funding to establish performance measures and then track and report their results. Each agency was required to (a) set program goals; (b) measure performance against those goals; (c) report progress publicly; (d) improve program effectiveness and accountability by promoting a new focus on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction; and (e) improve service delivery by planning to meet program objectives and providing information about program results and service quality.

The passage of GPRA was not a surprise. For some time, political and lobbying groups had publicized misuse of public funds and called for accountability measures. Nonetheless, organizations and agencies were caught off guard. They found themselves debating what their outcomes ultimately were and grappling with how to measure them. For airports, the discussion centered on not how many planes took off, but on how many took off on time, how many accidents occurred, and how many pieces of luggage were lost and ultimately found. For the post office, the discussion shifted from how many pieces of mail were processed to how many pieces were misdirected and how long customers had to stand in line for service. The context shifted from routine operations to a focus on customer satisfaction and met needs.

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) shifted from a focus on whether the teachers delivered the curriculum to whether the students were gaining in knowledge and skills. ED (2001) announced four goals to meet the GPRA requirements:

1. Help all students reach challenging academic standards so that they are prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment.
2. Build a solid foundation for learning for all children.
4. Make the United State Department of Education a high performance organization by focusing on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction.

These four goals established a model for states and local school systems to focus on outcomes that would be needed to achieve the challenge of
GPRA. Today, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget uses Program Assessment Rating Tools (PART, 2007) for every program receiving federal funding to

assess and improve a program’s effectiveness and efficiency. The quality check process will review PART programs to ensure they have consistent, reasonably aggressive and outcome-oriented performance goals. These goals are used in program assessments and evaluations and are the focus of attention by stakeholders, program managers, departments and agencies, Congress and future Administrations. (Office of Management and Budget, 2008)

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

George W. Bush, upon taking office, announced the NCLB as the priority of his administration’s domestic agenda. Upon its passage in 2001, which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994, it came to be considered as “one of the most sweeping changes to education in a generation” (Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2007, p. 34). Four overriding national policy goals formed the context for NCLB: equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency (A. Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007). Using as its charge the desire to improve educational results and hold schools accountable for meeting high academic standards (A. Turnbull et al.; Yell & Drasgow, 2005), the firm assumption of the mandate was that high expectations coupled with meeting academic competencies would produce more active, productive adults (Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2002). The tangible outgrowth of that assumption was the development of accountability measures, in the form of high-stakes testing tied to rigorous state academic standards.

Further direction was given within NCLB through guiding principles: (a) accountability for student growth, indicated through adequate yearly progress (AYP) showing systematic improvement at the school level toward 100% proficiency in academic standards by 2014; (b) accountability for highly qualified teachers, indicated through meeting proficiency standards before being certified; (c) accountability in local flexibility of how funds are to be used to meet NCLB outcome expectations; (d) accountability for safe schools to facilitate learning; and (e) accountability for opportunity provision to parents for educational participation, evaluation, and decision making (R. Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2006; Yell & Drasgow, 2005). It is these guiding principles that were heeded when IDEA (2004) was crafted, in an effort to reduce NCLB/IDEA conflict (Murdick et al., 2007).

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1997 reflected the outcomes focus of GPRA. State and local special education programs were required to conduct a comprehensive self-evaluation process. With specific criteria to address, each local educational agency (LEA) assembled stakeholder groups to identify outcomes and outcome measures, then proceeded to design and implement a self-evaluation process. No longer would it be
sufficient to have students’ special education folders ready when the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) representatives came for the scheduled monitoring visits. Of course, the monitors would still be concerned with whether due process measures had been met as documented within the student folders, but now they would also be looking for documentation that student outcomes were improving. Data were gathered related to graduation rate, participation in general education programs, and performance on state- and district-level progress measures. Many states began follow-up or longitudinal studies on postschool outcomes of students with disabilities. Each LEA began the process of gathering input from stakeholder groups with strong parent participation. Special Education Advisory Boards, with 50% parents or individuals with disabilities as members, became influential. Parents shared their stories in interviews, surveys, and testimony, and their broad awareness of the whole life of their child impacted decisions made by special education leaders. The question shifted from “Are we following regulations in providing services?” to “Are we providing required services in ways that provide optimum student benefit?”

IDEA 2004, following the lead of NCLB (2002), further strengthened the focus on outcomes measures. The major purposes of the law were redefined to address barriers perceived to have plagued prior versions: low expectations and insufficient application of research on proven teaching and learning methods for students with disabilities. The accountability constructs established by NCLB set high expectations for all students in the general education curriculum while assessing their proficiency relative to that curriculum and was the conduit for IDEA embracing NCLB as a partner in addressing perceived weaknesses within its own accountability system.

To provide outcome measures for these concerns, as well as other aspects of special education service provision, IDEA 2004 required all states to develop a State Performance Plan (SPP) describing how they would implement the Act’s requirements and purposes and improve results for students with disabilities. In addition to the 6-year SPP (covering 2005–2010), IDEA required each state to develop and submit an Annual Performance Report (APR) describing its progress in meeting the targets established in the SPP. As a way to organize these data, states were asked to respond to 20 performance indicators addressing three areas:

(A) Provision of a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

(B) State exercise of general supervisory authority, including child find, effective monitoring, the use of resolution sessions, mediation, voluntary binding arbitration, and a system of transition services . . . .

(C) Disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education and related services, to the extent the representation is the result of inappropriate identification. (20 U.S.C. §1416, Sec. 616(a)(3))

Of particular importance to the goals of this book is Indicator 8, which charges states to give clear accountability measures on parent participation; specifically, it requires data on the percentage of parents with a child
receiving special education services who report that schools “facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities” [20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(A)]. During the last decade, it has become clear that parent involvement in the special education process is not to be undervalued or underdeveloped; conversely, the mandatory language has moved steadily forward in not only placing parents in valuable positions within the process, but also in requiring data showing that parent involvement is indeed happening.

Foundations of Parent/Family Involvement

**Epstein’s Research on Parent Involvement in Education**

For over two decades, Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, has been leading research on types, outcomes, and methods of promoting parent involvement in education. Her early research into the effectiveness of school programs, the extent of family influence, and the impact of socioeconomic community conditions on the success of students revealed that these three forces could not be clearly distinguished (Epstein, 1996). She proposed that school, communities, and families have overlapping spheres of influence on children. Further, she advocated for partnerships to be formed between the three entities, mutually responsible to create better programs and opportunities for students. These partnerships must view the child holistically, requiring the influence of each sphere in order to “engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes” (Epstein, 1995, p. 702).

In the evolution of the parent involvement movement, Epstein states, “The first frameworks focused mainly on the roles that parents needed to play and not the work that schools needed to conduct in order to organize strong programs to involve all families in their children’s education” (Epstein, 1996, p. 211). This description mirrors the evolution of parent involvement in transition planning, placing the burden of responsibility for partnership on parents, rather than on the school. Our analysis of special education mandates and accountability (see Chapter 8) reveals a focus on parent rights and visibility in the process, but not on schools building a reciprocal partnership between schools and families.

In 1996, Epstein reported that the underlying research question in general education had moved from, “Are families important for student success in school,” to “If families are important for children’s development and school success, how can schools help all families conduct the activities that will benefit their children?” (p. 213). The research of the National Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children’s Learning, created in 1990 by the federal government at Johns Hopkins University under Epstein’s leadership, included over 20 researchers from several disciplines. Using varied methods and measurement models, they worked closely with educators and parents to design and study new approaches for productive partnerships (Epstein, 1996). The Center created an International Network of over 300 researchers in the United States and more than 40 nations “to encourage and to share work on many topics related to school, family, and community.
partnerships” (Epstein, 1996, p. 212). Through this collaborative venture, studies

began to clarify the amorphous term parent involvement, and recast the emphasis from parent involvement (left up to the parent) . . . to school, family, and community partnerships . . . . The concept of “shared responsibility” removed part of the burden from parents to figure out independently how to become or stay involved in their children’s education from year to year and put part of that burden on schools to create programs to inform and involve all families. (Epstein, 1996, p. 211; see also Epstein & Salinas, 2004)

The result of this research has led to a shifting context for parent involvement in education.

Schools, districts, and states joining the National Network of Partnership Schools, (NNPS), based at Johns Hopkins University under the leadership of Epstein, submit information about their partnership practices and their student achievement data. In return, they are given training and technical assistance in infusing strategies for strong partnerships within their improvement plans. In 2003, NNPS initiated a 5-year longitudinal study of 400 schools in 50 districts, to assess the effects of the NNPS intervention model on family and community involvement to support student achievement in reading, math, and science. The project will “scale up” professional development tools, guidelines, and approaches for curriculum-linked involvement activities that have been developed, pilot tested, and shown to (a) produce systemic and sustained change in district and school knowledge, policies, and programs of school, family, and community partnerships; (b) effectively improve the involvement of parents and the community; and (c) increase student reading, math, and science achievement, and other indicators of student success (Epstein et al., 2007).

In a review of research on the relationship between parent involvement and student reading proficiency, Sheldon and Epstein (2005) concluded that the critical factor was whether schools designed and implemented quality parent involvement activities targeted at giving parents skills to support their child’s literacy skills acquisition. Further, they stated,

Research on a nationally representative sample of secondary students show that, after controlling for prior levels of achievement, students tend to score higher on reading achievement tests and/or earn higher grades in English if their parents have discussions with them about school and about their future plans, check their homework, and maintain high educational expectations. (p. 119)

They reported similar findings relative to math achievement: “Students in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty had had lower math achievement test scores, but this effect was ameliorated by on-going parent involvement in high schools” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006, p. 10).

In their call for additional research on parent partnership practices and results, Epstein and Sheldon (2006) provide evidence that when school improvement plans incorporate goals and specific actions to promote targeted parent engagement, with support and technical assistance from the district, these activities are more likely to be conducted and gains in student
achievement are more likely to be found. All these research findings point towards benefits of building a systematic approach to engaging parents within the transition process.

**Transition Implications of Epstein’s Research**

Research findings from the Johns Hopkins National Center make six contributions to improving transition outcomes for students with disabilities. First, the research has shown that partnerships contribute to increased student achievement. Second, the research confirms that parent involvement tends to decline across the grades, unless schools and teachers work to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnerships at each grade. Third, the research indicates that teachers’ practices to involve families are as or more important than family background variables such as race or ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mother’s work status for determining whether and how parents become involved in their children's education. That is, schools and teachers who practice strategies for building parent partnerships can have more influence on the involvement of parents than family background variables. Fourth, the research has documented that there are subject-specific links between the involvement of families and increases in achievement by students. For example, studies of teacher practices to involve parents with in-home reading activities report more involvement in family reading and improved student reading scores. Fifth, not all activities to involve families lead quickly or directly to increased student outcomes. Instead, for example, interactions about parenting skills during transition years would first be expected to affect parents’ informal interactions with their young adults. If families continue to influence or reinforce students’ attitudes, behaviors, or motivation, then student outcomes may increase over time. And sixth, the research has shown that all parties want more partnerships between schools, families, and communities, but most don’t know how (Epstein, 1995, 1996; Pleet, 2000).

Epstein’s Six Types of Parent Involvement (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004) emerged from this extensive research, and provide a useful framework for developing partnerships with families. Each type has applications for transition planning (Pleet, 2000).

1. **Parenting activities** equip parents with the information, skills, and supports to be effective parents to their adolescents with disabilities during the transition years. These activities address questions such as: What do I need to know as a parent about the adult service eligibility system so that I can assure that my teenager will be able to access needed supports and services? How do we provide guidance to our teenagers as they make choices about future employment, further education, and independent living? How do we coach our teenagers as they develop self-determination skills so needed for their future?

2. **Communication activities** must be two-way, regular, and meaningful. Schools and adult providers should inform parents about upcoming events and proposed program or system reforms. In order to be two-way, these activities provide opportunities for input from parents and interagency organizations. The public forums required under IDEA 2004 and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 are examples of
communication activities. Most important, schools establish reciprocal channels of communication about each individual student’s issues, goals, and progress.

3. **Volunteering activities** include opportunities for parents to support school goals and student learning “in any way, at any place, and at any time—not just during the school day and at the school building” (Epstein, 1996, p. 705). Parents might contact their own employers to arrange for job shadowing or field trip opportunities for students, organize parent support networks, or serve on an advisory boards. The role of the school is to (a) recruit volunteers from all parents, (b) provide for schedule flexibility, (c) address training needs, (d) match parent talents with school and student needs, and (e) recognize the efforts of parents. The view of volunteering presented here is quite different from the old paradigm of parents volunteering at a bake sale.

4. **Learning at home activities** are designed to engage parents as partners in the learning the students do outside of the school or adult training facility. One activity that has yielded positive results for students and for schools is to expand “homework” to include interactive assignments students are to complete with family members. For example, a homework assignment might be to interview two working adults in your home or community about the process that led to their career choices. Schools also provide guidance to parents as to the expectations for their role in homework, “encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing—not teaching” (Epstein, 1995, p. 705).

5. **Decision-making activities** include parents in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives. IDEA 2004 requires special education advisory panels comprising more than 50% parents or individuals with disabilities. These panels provide decision-making opportunities for parents, but the challenge for schools will be to promote similar opportunities for all parents of students receiving special education services. Schools need to create multiple strategies to engage parents in the development and evaluation of special education programs and services, listening to a wide range of parents—not just those who would rubber-stamp administrative proposals.

6. **Collaborating with community activities** have significant importance for families during the transition years. Transition planning for each student who receives special education services, beginning no later than the age of 16 (14 in some states) requires consideration of work-based learning opportunities, community-based learning opportunities, and linkages with community and adult services. The challenge in this type of parent involvement is to develop strategies that empower the student and integrate resources—and yet keep the parent involved. One example of Type 6 is producing a transition fair with adult and college support services and employers. Another example is an organized field trip for parents and students to the local community college for an orientation to services, course expectations, and financial aid.

Using this framework does not mean coordinating six different activities; one strategically planned activity may incorporate several types of
parent involvement. For example, if a school or adult agency sponsors a parent-organized, parent-to-parent mentoring program, this activity could have dimensions that fit at least Types 1, 2, and 3. Epstein’s research is the basis for the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships (National PTA, 2007), as well as a primary foundation for the conceptual framework for this book.

The Changing Role of Parents as Partners

Parent Role Changes Across Education

As a result of the research of Epstein and others, a conceptual shift is occurring across education related to parent involvement. Parents had historically been viewed as a cadre of volunteers for the school, primarily responsible for ensuring that their children came to school ready to learn. With the publication of Goals 2000 (Educate America Act of 1994) came the charge of Goal 8: “By the year 2000 . . . every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (20 U.S.C. § 580, Sec. 102(8)(A)). NCLB, further expanding the role of parents, requires districts and schools to involve families in ways that will boost student achievement. Yet, most districts and schools are struggling with how to implement effective partnership programs and how to measure the “value added” effects of family and community involvement for student achievement in specific subjects. (Epstein et al., 2007)

In the best situations, as school leaders developed plans to build these partnerships, they realized that in any partnership, the partners come with complementary but different levels of expertise, skills, and knowledge. Yet, they come together with common vision and goals. They recognized that partnerships must be built on open communication, trust, and flexibility, and must focus on collaborative problem solving and strategy design. Within this new view of the role of parents, educational leaders began to design new approaches to offer parents opportunities. Schools welcomed parents into efforts to meet the national goals to assist students to achieve challenging academic standards in preparation for responsible citizenship, lifelong learning, and productive employment (GPRA, 1993). Many school leaders acknowledged that partnership with parents was critical.

Unfortunately, there were also school leaders who resisted building partnerships with parents. Their role as the expert in educational matters was threatened as they were confronted with the new paradigm. These educators enjoyed the superiority and security of having the answers at the back of the book, of being the teachers who delivered subject matter to “eager and willing” open learners. They might lose control of their classrooms if they organized learning in response to different learning styles with interactive or differentiated learning strategies. They were afraid of what would happen if they “lowered” themselves to include parents on school reform committees as equal partners. They held parents at arms’
length, giving them only the most basic of information without revealing
the deep-seated issues underlying school reform dilemmas.

Parents either backed off and became silent, acquiescing members, or
became aggressive in their determination to be heard (Garriott, Wandry, &
Snyder, 2000). Many parents spoke at school board meetings, wrote letters
to newspapers, and refused to accept inadequate education for their chil-
dren. Some educational leaders took deliberate measures to reduce the
impact of these parents. Administrators discouraged teachers from “leak-
ing” information to parents (“no need to air our dirty linens in public”).
One principal refused to allow a teacher to conduct a parent information
night because “an armed parent is a dangerous parent” (anonymous, per-
sonal communication, c. 2000). Davies (2002) conducted research to com-
pare practices he had observed in 1996 with current practices of involving
parents as partners in education. He noted a change in the presence of the
language of partnership; politicians, educational leaders, advocates, and
conferences all highlighted family involvement and partnership. On the
other hand, he said, “practices in most schools have hardly caught up with
the flourishing rhetoric” (p. 389). The first of his seven recommendations is
that teachers and principals must join together in designing the partnership
approaches to be used.

Parent Role Changes in Special Education

While the paradigm shift in parent involvement was occurring in general
education, a parallel shift was happening in special education. Beginning
with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, schools were
required to involve parents in the identification, assessment, and individu-
alized program decisions for their children with disabilities. The process
could not occur without parental consent—but this was not the same thing
as building partnerships with parents. GPRA (1993), Goals 2000 (1994), and,
later, NCLB (2002) influenced legislators developing the reauthorization of
IDEA 1997 and 2004. The regulations and monitoring requirements of IDEA
2004 clearly directed state and LEAs to build partnerships with parents.

The enhanced requirements for building partnerships with parents in
the regulations of IDEA 2004 can be grouped into six categories:

1. States must ensure that the rights of parents are protected and com-
plaint procedures and safeguard procedures for the child’s individual-
ized education program (IEP) are disseminated and implemented.
There are enhanced documentation requirements for school attempts to
secure parental participation in IEP planning meetings.

2. The majority of members of any State Advisory Panel (appointed by the
governor in most states) must be individuals with disabilities or parents
of children with disabilities. This Panel advises the state educational
agency on the unmet needs of students with disabilities. It comments
publicly on the rules or regulations proposed by the state and advises
the state on developing evaluative measures and reporting data to
OSEP. The Panel also advises the state on developing corrective action
plans to address findings identified in federal monitoring reports and
advises the state educational agency on developing and implementing
policies related to coordinating services for students with disabilities.
Finally, the State Advisory Panel conducts meetings available to the public and submits an annual report to the state. LEAs are required to have local advisory boards as well (20 U.S.C. §1412, Sec. 612(21)(B)).

3. Parents are integral to the State and Local Performance Plans. In both plans, IDEA mandates that there must be provision for joint training of parents, special educators, related service providers, and general education personnel.

4. Parent counseling and training is a related service available as needed within the IEP. This service is defined as “assisting parents in understanding the special needs of their child, providing parents with information about child development, and helping parents to acquire the necessary skills to allow them to support the implementation of their child’s IEP” (20 U.S.C. §1412, Sec. 300.34(c)(B)(iii)).

5. Monitoring of local school systems and nonpublic placements is a complex process with many component parts. One of the required parts is direct information from parents. This may include parent questionnaires or other methods to gain parent perspectives on the effectiveness of special education services and programs. Special education leaders must show how parent input was obtained and used in evaluation and improvement plans.

6. IDEA provides funding for parent training and information centers and community resource centers in each state to provide technical assistance, information, and referrals so that parents can “develop the skills necessary to cooperatively and effectively participate in educational planning and decision making” (20 U.S.C. §1470. Sec. 670(1)(2)(3)).

A Brief History of Transition Planning and the Parents’ Role

**Evolution of Transition Planning Requirements in IDEA**

In her 1984 policy paper, “Bridges from School to Working Life,” Madeleine Will, Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), and herself a parent of a child with a disability, spoke of services needed to help students with disabilities make the transition from secondary education to adult life. She encouraged schools and adult service agencies to address the complex issues that students and families face as they navigate this transition. Professional conferences and publications delineated the issues, proposed strategies, and described programs designed to assist students and their families—but these transition discussions were generally held separately.

IDEA 1990 required schools to include transition planning as a component in IEP planning. The guidelines for establishing transition goals on the IEP by age 16, tying them to other goals and objectives, or implementing interagency partnerships were not particularly well defined, nor were measures to ensure any degree of quality.

The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 shifted the focus for transition planning. The purpose of the special education law added an additional phrase (in italics): The purpose of special education was to “provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) designed to meet their unique needs...”
and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living” (20 U.S.C. §1400(c)(5)(A)(i)). With this shift in focus, partly in response to GPRA (1993), transition was not considered an add-on conversation, but rather the initial conversation in the IEP planning process. In other words, once the student reached 14 (or earlier, if appropriate) the IEP team would (a) establish the student’s interests and future goals as a context for the student’s individualized planning process, (b) examine the student’s present levels of performance, transition service needs (in a course of study), and needed transition services (in a coordinated set of activities), and (c) develop annual goals and objectives (Storms, O’Leary, & Williams, 2000).

IEP teams began to realize how crucial parent input was to this new process. Parents had important contributions to make to discussions about their own children’s hopes, dreams, present performance, and goals. Parents and guardians generally become the case managers for the young adult with disabilities as they move to services beyond high school. In addition to the case management role, parents assist in helping their children to clarify postschool goals and articulate needs and preferences (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). Further, the language was clear regarding age of majority rights for students with disabilities to be shared during transition planning; this helped prepare parents in advance to preclude unnecessary guardianship applications or misunderstanding of the parental role in the transition planning process (Lindsey, Wehmeyer, Guy, & Martin, 2001; Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006).

IDEA 2004 brought a change in timelines and a slight shift in focus relative to transition planning. Rather than requiring the onset of transition planning at age 14, the 2004 requirement shifted the onset of formal planning to no later than the first IEP in place at age 16. The Act offered a clarification of FAPE as a path to preparation for further education (newly added), employment, and independent living. In addition, it shifted transition language from an outcomes-oriented process to a results-oriented process, grounded in measurable IEP goals stemming from age-appropriate assessments. These alterations reinforced the new marriage between IDEA and NCLB, both in terms of expected outcomes and performance measurement. Despite concerns, though, about the perceived dichotomy between heavy accountability to performance and the tenets of transition programming vis-a-vis course of study and instructional activities, the pervasive mindset being supported is that these are not dichotomous ideas, but rather may be viewed as symbiotic pathways to postschool success (Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2002; Patton & Trainor, 2002; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, & Kozleski, 2002).

Although the vision of transition as a student/family-centered process continued under the mandates of IDEA 2004, practitioners were not always accurate in perceptions of families relative to the transition process. Wandry and colleagues (2008) surveyed preservice teachers on their perceptions of barriers and facilitators to effective transition practices they had encountered in field and teaching experiences. One relevant finding indicated that family involvement was regarded as the most crucial conduit to effective transition planning, and correspondingly that the lack of such involvement was a prime barrier to effective transition programming. The caution of this finding is that practitioners may blame parents for ineffective transition planning.
planning and implementation rather than recognize their own responsibility for engaging parents in the process.

**NLTS2 Findings Related to Parent Involvement**

The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (Newman, 2005) examined school factors and postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities. NLTS2 investigated a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 youth who on December 1, 2000, were ages 13 through 16, receiving special education, and in at least seventh grade. Information was gathered from parents/guardians of NLTS2 youth in telephone interviews or through mail questionnaires in the spring and summer of 2001, 2003, and 2005. Combined, these responses provide a national picture of the extent of parent participation in the education of their children with disabilities (see Table 1 for responses to selected questions).

Parents of the sample population were surveyed in three waves (2001, 2003, and 2005) to gather their perspectives on their involvement in various capacities during their children’s transition years. Although there was a trend as the sample population grew older for parents to report increasing satisfaction with the amount they were involved in the IEP process, there was also a trend for these parents to less frequently attend those IEP meetings or other meetings of support groups and parent information training centers. Parents also reported little increase in student participation or leadership in the IEP meeting. Although other findings of the NLTS2 provide valuable data to make conclusions about in school and community variables that influence successful postschool outcomes, we believe that these data are inconclusive and provide a tenuous platform at best for establishing viable parent partnerships.

**Rehabilitation Act/Workforce Investment Act Requirements**

In 1998 the reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also incorporated requirements for reporting outcomes and for building partnerships with parents of clients. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 as a component of the larger Workforce Investment Partnership Act of 1998 (WIPA) largely reinforced the earlier 1993 reauthorization regulations encouraging client and family involvement. In addition, several changes in the 1998 amendments reinforced the partnership message.

Within the WIPA itself (now referred to as Workforce Investment Act, WIA; 20 U.S.C. §9201), the key action of establishing youth councils within local Workforce Investment Boards (Section 117, Title I) demonstrated a strong commitment to consumer input. WIA also required the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to become a partner in the one-stop service delivery system mandated by WIPA (Section 121). This practice, grounded in interagency information sharing, was designed to simplify employment-related adult service agency access by consumers—which in turn was intended to have a positive effect on the ability of agencies and consumers to work together in expediting the application and eligibility determination process.
The Rehabilitation Act of 1993 and the Amendments of 1998 had several components to potentially strengthen the partnerships between agency providers and consumers and their families. Specifically, a youth in transition (who was an applicant or eligible client of the RSA) engaged in developing the Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) was provided (a) information on increased options, and (b) technical assistance in developing the IPE as well as other pertinent information. Client empowerment was further evident in the principle of informed choice. Although the regulatory language (Section 361.52, now subsumed into the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) purposely did not define this term, the intent was clear in the

### Introduction to the Role of Families in Secondary Transition

#### TABLE 1: Findings of the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Responses</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in the IEP process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Were involved about the right amount</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would like to be more involved</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult met with teachers to set postsecondary goal</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult went to IEP meeting for special education program in the current or prior year</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>87.1%</td>
<td>85.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP goals are strong and challenging for youth (agree or strongly agree)</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
<td>88.0%</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult spoke with youth about his/her school experiences (regularly)</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student participation in IEP meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Youth present/ participated little</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Youth provided some input</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Youth took a leadership role</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult provided assistance with homework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5 or more times per week(^a)</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3–4 times per week</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1–2 times per week</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Less than once per week(^b)</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Never</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult volunteered at the school (1 or more times)</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belongs to support groups for families of youth with disabilities</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended meetings/trainings supported by parent information training center (yes)</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* IEP = Individualized education program. Dash indicates that data were not obtained or reported. \(^a\)Parents of youth without disabilities = 4%. \(^b\)Parents of youth without disabilities = 45%.
increased empowerment of those accessing rehabilitation services, and the responsibility of RSA to provide adequate information to support informed choice making.

Systemically, the Rehabilitation Act of 1993 and its 1998 Amendments offered regulatory language that strengthened the voice of the consumers and their families. Within the due process arena, the Act was clear in its intent to provide effective mediation and impartial hearing rights for applicants or eligible individuals and their representatives (Section 361.57) dissatisfied with planned or provided services. Representation within systemic structures also increased, in that State Rehabilitation Councils were required to include a representative of a parent training and information center. This presence was particularly important, because the Council, in consultation with the Workforce Investment Board, was empowered to engage in program evaluation and systemic change.

Finally, the Rehabilitation Act and its Amendments offered direct service to families of applicants and eligible individuals, in recognition of the potential for family involvement in the rehabilitation process. Specifically, vocational rehabilitation services were available, as necessary, to family members to enable the client to achieve an employment outcome. This family partnership also was a basis for providing training and technical assistance in the use of assistive technology, recognizing that family support may be necessary to develop the client’s proficiency across settings.

The language and the intent of WIA and the Rehabilitation Act and its Amendments evinced strong roots in consumer and family empowerment. The challenge before us is the translation of language and intent into practices that truly embrace these partnerships.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this book is built upon three beliefs:

- Parents need to be fully informed partners in education and adult service provision.
- It is the practitioner’s responsibility to empower parents to emerge as partners in ways that are individually appropriate to the family’s circumstances.
- It is the parents’ responsibility to become accountable for action upon and within the system.

The chapters of this book address family systems, structures, and sociological context (Chapter 2), and the roles that parents can and should play during the transition years, both in school and adult service agencies (Chapters 3–7). These roles are:

1. Parents as collaborators in the IEP process
2. Parents as instructors in their youth’s emergent independence
3. Parents as decision makers and evaluators
4. Parents as peer mentors
5. Parents as systems change agents
The chapters develop, within each role, a vision of effective parent activities, success indicators, the challenges faced by parents, and research-based strategies to empower parents.

Charge to the Reader

Although there is little disagreement about the importance of having parents as full partners in the transition process, there has historically been a lack of evidence that schools are proactively building these partnerships. We believe that practitioners need preservice and inservice professional development to gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions underpinning these partnerships. Additionally, this book can be seen as a tool to critically assess levels of parent involvement in school and agency settings, and to pragmatically plan steps to personally or organizationally facilitate more empowered parent partnerships. Appendix A’s Parent Transition Information Needs Survey is a tool to be given to parents prior to IEP meetings that will include discussion of transition issues; Appendix B’s Degree of Involvement Scale is a tool that practitioners can use to determine the extent of involvement for individual parents relative to our five roles; and Appendix C’s Parent Engagement Strategic Planning Guide is an evaluation tool that practitioners can use to identify proactive strategies that are currently in place or missing. In addition, the authors of each chapter have included specific evidence-based strategies to assist schools, districts, and programs in moving from a willing stance into action, as well as illustrations of promising practices implemented in local districts, schools, or agencies. Practitioners can use each chapter’s Indicators of Success as a self-assessment of their own competencies and practices.

We challenge you, our readers, whether you are involved in educational or adult service provision for youth with disabilities. As practitioners in the transition process, you hold the power to empower families to emerge as full partners. Your attitude and your actions will speak louder than your words. When parents reflect on their contact with you, what will they say? Will they say you gave them the knowledge and skills to become collaborators, instructors in their youth’s emergent independence, decision makers and evaluators, peer mentors, and system change agents? Will they say you supported their efforts to become more effective parents and influential members of the community? Will they say you made a difference in their family’s partnership with professionals? Our intent is that this book will give you useful tools. We know every tool won’t produce the same results with every family. We entrust you to use your professional judgment and creativity to design strategies that work and share your successes and lessons learned with your colleagues. Together we can build strong partnerships with parents that will build improved outcomes for young adults with disabilities.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AMY M. PLEET has over 35 years of experience as an English Teacher, Special Education Teacher, Transition Specialist (district and state department), higher education faculty (Special Education Graduate Director and Associate Professor) and now Secondary Inclusion Consultant with the University of Delaware to districts committed to improving the effectiveness of instruction for included students with disabilities. As the parent of two young adults with disabilities, Dr. Pleet is especially aware of a parent’s perspectives and the contributions they can make. Her research and writing focus on building parent partnerships, self-determination, and inclusionary secondary school reform.

DONNA L. WANDRY is an Associate Professor of Special Education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Wandry has served children and youth with disabilities directly in school and agency settings. She was the Project Director for a federal systems change transition grant while serving as the transition coordinator at the Kansas Board of Education, and has taught transition coursework at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in higher education for 15 years. She is a national Past President of the Council for Exceptional Children’s Division on Career Development and Transition. Her primary areas of interest are special education legislation and movement from school to adult life for persons with disabilities, with a focus on working with families and providers to create systemic changes that facilitate that movement.