

Transition Bulletin - Summer Issue

To Coordinate... To Enhance... To Serve...Through Communication



Out of the Mouths of Transition Students – Youth Said it Best at the MI-TOP Preconference

By: Cynthia Wright, MRS Rehabilitation Consultant

Students from all over Michigan journeyed to Frankenmuth to tell their transition stories at the Michigan Transition Services Association (MTSA) preconference session on March 17, 2010. The preconference event was sponsored by the Michigan Transition Outcomes Project (MI-TOP). Approximately 300 transition professionals listened and learned from the seven stu-

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dents who shared their individual transition experiences. All but one of the students were a few years out of high school so they recounted experiences from the time they were in high school leading to where they are now in their lives. The stories were diverse, powerful and, at times, entertaining. As we listened, common themes bubbled to the surface. They resounded in the students' voices.

“Support us to do it for ourselves.”

The students talked about wanting to be supported in a way that would ultimately lead them to independently accomplishing what needs to be done. For example, Jessica talked about having para-pros throughout her education that performed many personal care tasks for her. When she got to college she had no idea how to secure a personal care attendant, how to manage that person or instruct them regarding what she needed. This was a barrier for her in pursuing her postsecondary dreams as she struggled to figure it out. As Jessica told her story she shared that it would have been

helpful if her high school transition goals had included activities to help her know and express her needs to an aide as well as to learn how to hire and manage a personal care attendant.

Courtney described the same issue in the context of her learning. High school teachers provided many learning supports for her such as reading to her, organizing her work or helping her to remember to turn in her assignments. When she got to a postsecondary environment, she described a rude awakening. Her freshman year was an enormous challenge. She had to seek out the college disability support office, learn to proactively ask for accommodations and supports, develop study skills and do many things for herself that were done for her in high school.

“Challenge us.”

Another theme that resounded was that the students want to be challenged. Several students used phrases like “push us” and “don’t coddle us.” Lakata tearfully shared how her teachers passed her along in school even though she couldn’t read. Her perception was

that her teachers gave up on her. This fostered in her a very low opinion of herself. When she became pregnant with her son, she was afraid that she didn't have the intelligence to be a good mother. Through her involvement with Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Lakata had the opportunity to attend the Michigan Career and Technical Institute (MCTI) where she boosted her reading level enough to enroll in the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program. Now Lakata works full-time as a CNA and is proud to say that she is a good mother.

Jessica explained that because people in school had low expectations of her, she just went with the flow. When only one school was suggested for her to go to college, Jessica assumed that it was her only viable choice so that's where she went. While in college, she became so seriously ill that her life was in jeopardy. She recovered, at which point her outlook on life changed. She made a decision to never again be passive about her life goals. She decided to "go for it" and applied to Central Michigan University where she really wanted to go to school. She took a chance and was thrilled when she was accepted. Currently Jessica is in a master's degree program at CMU. Her goal now is to become a disability support counselor in a college setting.

"Believe in us."

Many of the students remembered times when people questioned their ability to do something. Lakata talked about how, at MCTI, she advocated for herself. She convinced the instructors to give her a chance to prove that she could be successful in the program rather than to assume she couldn't do it. She got her chance and succeeded in completing the program, passing her exams and becoming employed. Once Lakata was employed, a co-worker who recognized her difficulty reading asked how she was able to pass her certifying exam. Although Lakata at first replied "That really isn't any of your business," she went on to explain that she has a learning disability for which she had received accommodations to pass her exam. She also pointed out to her coworker that even though she struggles with reading, she can do her job just fine. After explaining her personal situation to her co-worker, Lakata told the audience that she added with spunk, "Does that help you?"

"Help us learn from our experiences."

Some of the students also acknowledged that they had set goals a little out of their reach. Courtney described having set her sights on becoming a special education teacher because of her empathy for students with disabilities. However, no matter how hard she tried, she could not pass the required math classes. She regrouped and decided to shift her focus to counseling children and families. When faced with the reality of the moment, she learned that she needed to be flexible. Courtney had the resilience to face this challenge, learn from her experience and not give up.

Justin graduated from a community college with a degree in media technology and was able to secure employment at a TV station. The specific job that he had was a real challenge for him and played more into his weaknesses than his strengths. After struggling for some time, Justin had the unfortunate experience of getting fired from his job. He was devastated, uncertain and lost confidence. It took him awhile to turn his life around. He described "being down" at one point and decided to do volunteer work to do something positive for himself by helping others. It was through this volunteer work that Justin found his footing and got on the right track eventually starting his own business. At MTSA he proudly told us

"...never again be passive about her life goals."

"It was through this volunteer work that Justin found his footing..."

that through his business he had earned and saved enough money to go on a vacation. "I'm leaving in the morning for Rome, Italy!" he told us with a smile.

"Agency and community connections make a difference."

Educators often struggle to make agency and community connections, but the students told us it is worth the extra time and effort. Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) was mentioned several times during the discussion. Stephanie talked about her MRS counselor and how much the assistive technology that was provided for her is helping her in college. Justin shared that he decided that he wanted to be an entrepreneur during a conversation with his MRS counselor. Courtney stated that her counselor is a wonderful support for her while she is attending college.

Other community connections were brought up as critical factors as well. Miranda talked about the Michigan Youth Leadership Forum (MYLF) being a "life changing" experience for her. It was at MYLF that Miranda learned that she should be attending her own IEP meetings and that an IEP plan should be *her* plan for her future and no one else's. After MYLF, her perspective shifted from feeling disenfranchised to becoming empowered. This gave her the courage to fight for her dream to go to college and eventually earn a bachelor's degree.

Another crucial community connection for Miranda was AmeriCorps where she served for a year at a center for independent living. On her final day of her AmeriCorps experience, her supervisor asked her if she wanted to report to work the next day as an employee. Miranda's answer... "Yes!"

"Relationships matter - a lot."

Most of the students shared that they did not have fond memories of their IEPs and that they did not find significant meaning in them. Jessica shared how annoying it was to be pulled out of her favorite art class for "that meeting." Miranda brought up that she was told that the meeting was for her parents and that she didn't need to attend. What Miranda does remember about those IEPs was that she was grounded for a week afterwards. Miranda added that she thinks things have changed a lot in the last few years since she graduated from High School pointing out that her younger sister now leads her own IEP meeting.

What the students **did** mention was how much certain caring teachers meant to them. Maurice and Courtney personally acknowledged teachers in the audience who had supported them and believed in them. The students then asked the audience to give their teachers a round of applause. Justin talked about a mentorship relationship that was profound for him. This pivotal person became an extremely influential part of Justin's life, stuck with him, inspired him, had high expectations of him and kept him on track.

The students strongly conveyed a message to us about the importance of relationships. Michigan's struggling economy is creating a budget crisis for education, including transition services and staff. However, the students told us that no matter how bad things get, or how stressed educational systems become, people can always make a difference. The students were very clear about this message – positive, authentic relationships are what mattered most to them.

"After MYLF, her perspective shifted from feeling disenfranchised to becoming empowered."

"...people can always make a difference."

Helping and supporting the transition of youth with disabilities to postsecondary life is a never ending learning curve. There are always new things to explore to support students to make effective transitions from high school to adult life roles. Transition doesn't rest on just one thing, one event, or one activity. There are many "aha" moments for students. Transition is a culmination of experiences that allows students to reach their potential. The good thing about this is that it gives us lots of chances to have an impact on students and we don't have to do it all at once or do it alone. At the MTSA presentation the students didn't tell us "success" stories or "failure" stories. They told us real stories - stories with ups and downs, trials and errors, and discovery along the way.

"Transition doesn't rest on just one thing, one event, or one activity."

The student's voice has spoken. And if we are listening, we hear a familiar reminder of why we choose to work in the field of transition – to make a difference in the lives of young people. Collectively the students seemed to plead to us, "Don't give up on us and we won't give up on you."

MRS Ramps Up for Transition Training for Counselors - Mark Your Calendar for August 17th

By: Cynthia Wright, MRS Rehabilitation Consultant

It has been several years since MRS counselors have received statewide transition training that focuses specifically on MRS transition programs and in that time a lot has been happening in Michigan that has an impact on students seeking MRS services. Many new MRS staff have been hired to serve transition caseloads and in some areas counselors have been assigned to serve transition customers for the first time. In addition, new special education teachers and transition coordinators are on board serving students with disabilities. The merit curriculum will be enforced for the 2011 graduation class bringing with it new challenges and concerns for students with disabilities. Student documentation that is provided to MRS by schools has changed and often no longer provides updated psychological testing. Individuals on the Autism Spectrum are on the rise and will continue to increase for transition age youth over the next several years.

To begin to address these challenges, MRS is developing Transition Training for MRS counseling staff. The training will be offered on August 17, 2010 at MTECH - Lansing Community College from 9:00am-3:30pm. The training is for MRS counseling staff and includes civil service and blended staff.

A design team has been assembled to identify specific areas to be addressed in the training. The design team participants are: Kathy Freeman, Theresa Thorne, Katherine King, Omar Deadwilder, Kelly Blodger, Kathy Flagstadt, Melissa Harding, Marci Alling, Tina Fullerton, Stacy Janusz, Kimberly Kazmirski, Shelly Neal, Claudia Pettit, Vicki Rafferty and Patrick Walsh. As a result of the work of the design team the training will include opportunities to:

- Learn about the latest happenings regarding transition in the Department of Education and MRS
- Networking and sharing
- Choose from a variety of breakout sessions in targeted areas

"Individuals on the Autism Spectrum are on the rise..."

Registration for Transition Training is available on E-Learn. If you want to attend the training, seek prior approval from your manager. Registration is limited to 75 participants.

Michigan Career and Technical Institute Opens MCTI-EAST

By: Patty Miller-Kramer, Executive Director of the Pine Lake Fund

The Michigan Career and Technical Institute (MCTI) is welcoming students at its MCTI-East campus in Detroit. Known as the second largest rehabilitation training center in the United States, the MCTI main campus offers a unique blend of caring human support services and state-of-the-art training for jobs needed in business and industry today. "The dream of expanding MCTI services to the southeast region is becoming a reality" says MRS Director Jaye Shamsiddeen. "The bureau has long felt that opening an MCTI training site on the eastside of the state would enhance opportunities for MRS customers in that area."

MCTI-East will be offering a career assessment service, as well as training in math and reading. Employability skills, critical thinking and problem solving will also be offered. The first vocational training program to be offered is Certified Nursing Assistant (C.N.A.). Agreements are being negotiated with local businesses and contractors to provide customized training. Supportive services such as career counseling, occupational therapy and classroom/ job accommodations will be provided.

Antoine Shaw, MCTI-East Manager says, "Providing customers with A-1 training programs and support services, gives customers, not only in Detroit, but surrounding communities the opportunity to reach their full potential and become a competitive employee or business owner." MCTI-East will be hosting an Open House on Thursday, June 17, 2010 to welcome students, referral partners and the business community.

The MCTI-East campus is located just off I-94 and Connor St (exit 220B) at 11457 Shoemaker, Detroit, MI 48213. For enrollment information contact Tanisha Foutner, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at 313-267-0125. The Institute, and its MCTI East location, is administered by Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS), under the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth (DELEG).



MCTI-East staff visits the MCTI main campus in Plainwell. **From left to right:** Antoine Shaw-Manager, Dawn Roby-Career Readiness Instructor, Yolanda Gordon-Career Readiness Instructor, Tony Richardson-C.N.A. Instructor and Tanisha Foutner-Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor.

"...Open House on Thursday, June 17, 2010..."

SAVE THE DATES

Asperger Syndrome: Re-Thinking the Glass House Theory
Loosemore Auditorium - Downtown GVSU Campus
401 Fulton Street West
Grand Rapids, MI
June 28 and 29, 2010

MRS Transition Training
LCC West Campus
5708 Cornerstone Drive
Lansing, MI
August 17, 2010

Conference MI-TOP Workshop
Ramada Inn Hotel & Conference Center
7501 W. Saginaw Hwy
Lansing, MI
October 28 and 29, 2010

Learning Disability Association Conference
Kellogg Hotel and Conference Center
55 South Harrison Road
East Lansing, MI
November 15 and 16, 2010

MTSA Conference
Bavarian Inn
713 South Main Street
Frankenmuth, MI
March 16 and 18, 2011

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