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CONNECTING SCHOOLWORK TO LIFE WORK:

students practice setting their own educational goals

By Theresa Johnson, John A. Serrano, and Daniel Veit

As educators working with high school students, we face questions such as:

- *How can students become better self-advocates?*
- *Are students sufficiently prepared for life after graduation?*
- *How can we help students become more motivated in planning their future?*
- *What can we do to encourage students to actively participate in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings?*

At the Texas School for the Deaf (TSD), a committee faced the task of exploring these questions. Our goal was to increase student participation in transition planning and foster student involvement during meetings in which their IEPs were discussed, updated, and written. Hawbaker (2007), who studied what happened when high school students led their IEP meetings, showed that these students demonstrated more involvement in their academic work and transition planning than those who participated in staff-led IEP meetings. Through leading IEP meetings, students develop a firmer understanding of their need for services and supports and grasp more clearly how accommodations help them to access the curriculum. This understanding might prepare them not only for their coming years in high school but for their years in university or postsecondary school—and for the world of work beyond.

With evidence—and hopes—we decided to give this a try, and intensive planning began.

Photos courtesy of Theresa Johnson, John A. Serrano, and Daniel Veit



Advisory Time

One of our first actions was to reframe the homeroom period. Instead of having students show up for attendance and study time alone, we renamed this time “advisory time,” and devoted it to academic and personal uses. Advisory time can be described as an organizational structure that allows a small group of students to identify with one educator who nurtures, advocates for, and looks out for the individuals in that group (Cole, 1992). Research indicates that advisory groups improve the relationships between student and teacher and lead to improvement in academic achievement (McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010). Through the use of advisory time, students gain feelings of support, increased self-knowledge, and additional access to the curriculum. We revised the

schedule for all of the students in high school, incorporating 20-minute advisory periods Monday through Thursday and a 60-minute advisory period on Friday.

We planned a series of mini-workshops and presentations that broke the complex concept of transition into teachable ideas and skills. Presentations and materials were developed in advance for teachers. Topics included:

- What is Transition?
- Self-Determination and Advocacy Skills
- Knowing Yourself (Self-Assessment)
- Identifying Postsecondary Goals
- Developing a Coordinated Set of Activities
- Preparing for Your IEP Meeting

STUDENT CONTRIBUTORS



Margaret Kopp, a senior at TSD, is co-enrolled for courses at Austin Community College. An aspiring writer, she plans to attend Gallaudet University after high school graduation.



Amy Johnson, a senior at TSD, is a member of the Jr. National Association of the Deaf, president of her class, and active in sports and other extracurricular activities. She spends her summers working in the science labs at the University of Texas.

Above left: The concept of *transition* is taught through a series of mini-workshops and presentations.

IEP Meetings

Advisory group teachers engaged in a dialogue to come to common understandings and to give us an opportunity to gather feedback and refine our materials. At the beginning of the year, students took various assessments and surveys to identify their interests, strengths, and needs. This led to students developing transition goals that were more relevant and meaningful. Once their goals were established, students were able to identify priorities. From there, they worked on developing presentations to include their goals, interests, skills, areas of need, and other concepts related to transition. Seniors were our priority, but over time we worked with all high school students.

The advisory group teacher worked closely with each student to prepare his or her presentation. The student would practice his or her presentation and make revisions as needed. The IEP meetings began with the student's presentation; this reinforced the idea that IEP meetings are about the student and his or her future. After the presentation, the IEP committee members asked questions and made comments about the student's presentation and his or her transition plans. They also asked the student questions to sharpen his or her focus. These questions might include:

- How does your course selection connect to your postsecondary goals?
- How do your present levels of performance and goals align with your transition plan?

Once the students see the connection between their schoolwork and the jobs they will hold after graduation, transition planning becomes more meaningful and streamlined, which prompts the students to be more engaged in their IEP discussions.



A Student Perspective

By Maggie Kopp

First thing in the morning, while students are still feeling the effects of staying up far too late the previous night, we go to our advisory groups. Our discussions there include topics such as bullying, college applications, and preparing our resumes. Our advisory teachers are people we can talk to about our grades or any other problem.

Our advisory teachers also help us assemble our PowerPoint presentations for our IEP meetings. By empowering us to lead our own educational proceedings, our teachers have taught us several important life lessons. We have learned how to discover the path we want to follow—and how to take steps accordingly. We have learned how to communicate our needs and goals to our teachers, our counselors, and our parents, and we have learned how to make commitments towards results we will not realize until sometime in the future. Taking small steps, such as having an opportunity to lead our own IEP meetings, prepares us to take the world head-on.

Even though I was quite involved with meetings in the past, until last year I never had the chance to be the one standing up at the head of the table giving a presentation. Instead of staff discussing my future while I watched, I could be more in charge of the meeting—and my own academic future. Instead of discussing “what to do with Maggie,” the principal, my teachers, and my parents asked me questions. It was refreshing to feel like my voice was actually taken into consideration.



Left: Amy Johnson practices a PowerPoint presentation in preparation for her IEP meeting.

A Student Perspective

By Amy Johnson

When I was in eighth grade, I became the first student in our school to make a presentation for my IEP meeting. The IEP committee liked this idea, and they suggested that other students make presentations for their IEP meetings, too.

Students use their presentations to educate everyone in the meeting about their point of view. My presentation has changed a lot since eighth grade, and it has been helpful for me to compare the old and new presentations to see how my goals have changed over time. My hypothesis is that if students are motivated to create presentations and show everyone their future goals and ways to improve, they will get more support from their teachers, the principal, and others. They will be more prepared for college and know what to do in college with the knowledge they gained from high school.

A Mother's Perspective

By Theresa Johnson

As a parent, I had the normal concerns about my daughter Amy and her academic progress, career goals, and life plan in general. Like most teenagers, she changed her mind frequently and often talked of selecting a college based on the single criteria of where her friends were going. However, I am blessed with a child who is bright, motivated, and competitive—and she realizes the value of a good education and making good choices regarding transition planning.

Although I was only marginally aware of some of the changes TSD principal John Serrano was initiating, as a teacher who has worked both in higher education and rehabilitation, I am familiar with the requirements driven by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and I understood what needed to be done to achieve a good transition plan. As a result, Amy began attending her IEP meetings in the first grade. Of course, at best she was too young to understand everything, but the experience served to plant the seed that this meeting is about her school and her life plans. By middle school, Amy did not like the meetings, but she was able to hold her own and participate in the IEP discussions, expressing preferences, needs, and dislikes.

It was in her eighth grade year that I suggested she prepare a PowerPoint presentation and assume some leadership during the meeting. Student-led IEP meetings had yet to be implemented at TSD, but we were fortunate to have Mr. Serrano's support. He requested the AV equipment and allocated plenty of time for the meeting. He recognized the potential in Amy and encouraged her to speak her mind and have an equal voice in the meeting. Without her even realizing what was happening, he empowered her to be assertive about her preferences. He honored her choices even when they might be questionable and gently guided her towards considering alternatives. By the ninth and tenth grades, the transition

meetings really became Amy's meetings. Mr. Serrano explained each document, and if Amy did not know the vocabulary, he would take as much time as needed to make sure she fully understood what was happening. By this time, I had a very small role during these meetings. I signed papers, gave nods of approval, and occasionally reminded the group about something I knew Amy felt was important.

Amy is in the throes of her senior year now. She will likely only have one last IEP/transition meeting in the spring before graduation. As she is very motivated to make this year her best, I have no doubt it will be a successful year full of plans for college, career goals, and excitement about the impending independence.

In spite of the success we've had, more work remains. We continue to refine the materials and resources for advisory group teachers, adding topics for specific student groups, and using student presentations that were developed last year as a starting point for their electronic portfolios related to transition planning. Still, we are proud of what we have accomplished so far. At TSD, our students are learning to take the lead.

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