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Transition: Is it time for another rebottling?

by Andrew S. Halpern, Ph.D.

Following is an abridged version of Dr. Halpern's paper, which he presented at the 1999 Annual Project Directors' Meeting in Washington, DC on June 14-16, 1999. A complete copy of Transition: Is it time for another rebottling can be downloaded from the following website: http:llwww. ed. uiuc. edu/ped/tri/halpern99. htm.

The history of serving students with disabilities in our country remained spotty until the 1950s, when federal legislation began to emerge reflecting a tentative national policy on the education of "handicapped" children (Kirk & Gallagher, 1989). Early efforts focused primarily on the needs of young children with disabilities, frequently those with mental retardation, sensory deficits or physical disabilities, and we created "special" schools or classes for those who were viewed as being inadequately served within the regular education environment. At that time in our history, the "pull-out" model was invented for educating students with disabilities in a public school environment.

During the late 1950s, high school programs for students with mild mental retardation became increasingly prevalent, and serious questions were raised concerning the appropriateness and efficacy of these programs. For the most part, the content of these programs focused on remedial education, attempting to increase student skills in reading, language arts, writing and numeracy. In other words, high school students were being exposed to an elementary school curriculum within a high school setting, which was often a very humiliating experience for adolescents with disabilities who, no less than their non-disabled peers, were struggling with their emerging adulthood.

As the inadequacy of this type of remedial approach became increasingly evident, a new high school program began to emerge within special education that focused upon preparing students for life after leaving school. These programs addressed vocational goals primarily, but also attended to other life tasks such as personal/social development, and learning how to live independently in the community. These scattered efforts, known as work-study programs, became a full-fledged movement in the 1960s, serving primarily special education students with mild mental retardation (Halpern, 1974; 1978; 1985; Kolstoe & Frey, 1965).

When the work-study movement faded in the early 1970s, there was a temporary gap in the federal impetus supporting students with disabilities until the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 which included, but did not focus upon, secondary special education. And in 1984, special education returned to this area with vigor, introducing the transition movement as a major federal initiative (Will, 1984). Almost simultaneously, the Carl D. Perkins vocational education amendments of 1984 included a requirement that a portion of the total federal appropriations be "set aside" for the benefit of disadvantaged or disabled students (American Vocational Association, 1998). As this evolution of transition-oriented programs unfolded over some 25 years, the focus of these programs broadened from serving students with mild mental retardation to serving students with all types of disabilities.

When I examined this history around 8 years ago, it struck me that the issues and concerns being addressed within the "new" transition initiative were mostly not new at all, and I captured this sentiment through a metaphor, referring to the new transition programs as "old wine in new bottles" (Halpern 1992). The "new bottle" of transition has now been in the cellar for

Rebottling. continued on page 4

Rebottling, continued from page 1

around 15 years. *Can the needs of adolescents with disabilities still be served adequately through the current transition initiative, or is it time for another rebottling?*

A great deal has occurred under the transition banner, especially during the past 10 years. From the federal perspective alone, the Office of Special Education Programs has funded 549 projects that focus exclusively on transition programs. As I look toward the beginning of the 21st century, however, I am very uncertain about the future of our transition movement if we continue to regard it as essentially a component of special education.

During the past 20 years and, most seriously during the past decade, another educational movement has been unfolding in several different ways, all more-or-less captured by the term *general education reform* or *restructuring.* The transition movement in special education affects approximately 12% of the total student population. The general education reform movement, at least in theory, affects all students. *If the transition movement is to survive and thrive into the 21st century, how can it become aligned, if not integrated, into the general education reform movement?*

The regulations for the **1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments** stipulate the following requirements for building bonds between special and regular education (IDEA Law, 1999):

- IEPs must address ways of enhancing the student's involvement in the general education curriculum.
- Regular education teachers must be included in the student's IEP meeting, when appropriate.
- Students with disabilities must be included in state and district assessments, with appropriate accommodations or alternative assessments provided, when appropriate.
- Children with disabilities who attend public charter schools and their parents retain all rights under Part B of IDEA, and compliance is required whether or not a public charter school receives Part B funds.

The series of **Carl Perkins** vocational education amendments has a recent history of including people with disabilities and other special needs populations as appropriate recipients of the programs that are authorized through this legislation. The 1998 amendments identify the following special populations:

- Individuals with disabilities.
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged populations.
- Males or females preparing for jobs where their gender is typically under-represented.
- Single parents, including single pregnant women.
- Displaced homemakers.
- Individuals with other barriers including limited English proficiency (American Vocational Association, 1998).

In general, the law provides guidelines to insure that all of these special populations have equal access to recruitment, enrollment and placement activities that are supported through this legislation.

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 also contains language to insure that all of the programs it authorizes are fully accessible to students with disabilities (Cobb, et al., 1999). This act furthermore encourages recipients of funds to coordinate all of their programs and activities in their partnerships with concurrent efforts that pertain to general school reform (Benz & Cochhar, 1996).

The report from the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Relations, leaves no doubt concerning the intent of Congress with respect to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general educational reforms being promulgated by **Goals** 2000. Here are some of the words contained in this document:

The Committee wishes to send a clear and unequivocal message that Goals 2000: Educate America Act is fully consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act and implements the values and precepts of the ADA in the context of education reform. The Committee also wishes to send the message that this legislation is fully consistent with and complements the spirit and intent of Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Committee on Labor and Human Resources, 1993).

These pieces of federal legislation, accompanied by similar initiatives at the state level, represent a significant "top-down" commitment to general education reform, for all students including those with disabilities. *But how is this legislative commitment playing out where it really counts, in the classrooms and other learning environments throughout our country?*

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education published the findings of a national survey conducted in 1996, documenting the perceptions of 1445 public

Rebottling, continued on page 5

Rebottling, continued from page 4

school teachers on their implementation of school reforms (Alexander, et al., 1998). In spite of the fact that, by this time, standards-based reforms were being promulgated heavily through policy initiatives, only 44% of the high school teachers reported that they were even attempting to assist their students in achieving higher standards. With respect to the provision of in-service training, only 19% of the school teachers reported receiving information on school reform strategies to apply in the classroom.

In 1998, Lombard, Miller and Hazelkorn reported the results of a survey investigating teacher attitudes toward including students with disabilities into programs authorized by the school-to-work legislation and the vocational-technical programs authorized by the 1990 Carl Perkins amendments. Sixty-two percent stated that they had never participated in the IEPs of any of their students with disabilities. And only 49% stated that they had received any in-service training related to inclusion.

Total federal expenditures for education were $35-53 billion in FY 98 and fell 3.5% to $34.27 billion in FY 99. The administration proposes to increase this by 5.9% to $36.28 billion in FY 00. These federal appropriations represent 12% of approximately $300 billion that we now spend annually on education from federal, state and local resources combined (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999).

The third largest segment of the federal budget, around 13%, funds special education. During FY 99 we received $5.05 billion. Within this special education appropriation, the amount allocated for all national discretionary programs was $279.5 million in FY 99, which only amounts to around 6% of all federal funds given to special education, and less than one-tenth of a percent of total federal funding for all of education.

Somewhere within this tenth of a percent lies our national discretionary agenda for transition. *How can we use this very small amount of money effectively to press our own agenda, within both special and regular education?*

Before attempting to answer this question, let's take a brief look at the pattern of federal discretionary expenditures for secondary special education and transition as part of the overall federal budget for education. I believe that there are six areas where we either have laid or should lay a good foundation for focusing our future efforts. These include:

- Helping students to assume responsibility for their own education.
- Identifying and developing improved tools and programs for delivering transition-related instruction.
- Enhancing teacher skills for implementing transition programs and providing them with opportunities to use these skills.
- Involving parents more effectively in the education of their children.
- Facilitating the replication and utilization of proven programs.
- Doing whatever we need to do to enhance the integration of secondary special education and transition programs within the overall structure of general education reform.

In my opinion, the future success of all high school programs, including our own secondary special education and transition programs, must begin with the empowerment of students to assume a high level of responsibility for their own educations in an appropriate manner. We have been working on this issue in special education for the past decade from a variety of perspectives including defining student empowerment with the words *self-determination,* developing programs and instructional materials to teach students and significant others how to enhance student self-determination, and establishing organizations to promote self-determination.

Brian Cobb and his colleagues have conducted a research synthesis of best practices that have emerged over the past 15 years in our field of secondary special education and transition (Cobb, et al., 1999). They were able to identify a wide array of accomplishments that should play a role in guiding our future efforts. But they also identified a shortcoming that has not been addressed in the reported literature thus far, namely, an absence of studies about pedagogy. We have developed instructional materials that pertain to transition and programs to support the organization and delivery of transition services. But apparently, we have not attended carefully to the methods of instruction that will assist teachers in implementing the exemplary curricula and programs effectively.

If teachers are to become proficient in implementing what we have learned over the years and hope to learn in the future, we must assist them in such endeavors. Both in-service and pre-service training are needed, along with some focused demonstrations and evaluations on how

Rebottling, continued on page 10

Rebottling, continued from page 5

innovations can be accomplished by restructuring teacher time and effort, rather than by adding new responsibilities on top of a burden that is already quite large.

OSEP's overall commitment to personnel preparation is substantial, approximately $82 million in both fiscal years 1998 and 1999, representing nearly 30% of their entire budget for national activities. Assuming that this commitment remains strong in the future, we need to insure that a meaningful proportion of these dollars are used to support special and general education teachers in implementing high school and transition programs successfully.

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In addition to enhancing the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers in the educational enterprise, we must also somehow find a way of involving parents more effectively. The most important role for parents to play, in my opinion, is to interact effectively with their sons or daughters at home. In fiscal years 1998 and 1999, OSEP allocated $18.5 million each year for parent information centers, and the administration has requested $22.5 million for fiscal year 2000, an increase of 22%. We should continue to support these efforts, and offer whatever insights and assistance we can in order to help these programs attend effectively to transition issues and concerns.

There are many transition programs that we have developed over the years that properly be construed as "best practices" based on external reviews of their impact. I think that our field is now in the position where we should be devoting substantial resources to disseminating and replicating those programs that have shown the most progress. It is time to move from demonstration to widespread implementation, from using our discretionary funds to affect the lives of a few people, to using these funds to affect the lives of many people. This strategy will be especially important if the dramatic decline in federal funds earmarked for special education transition programs can not be reversed.

And finally, we need to support research, demonstration and utilization of models and programs that enhance the integration of secondary special education and transition programs and policies within the overall structure of general education reform.

In addition to focusing some of our own special education national discretionary federal funds in this arena, I believe that it is important for us to explore ways of connecting with programs and initiatives that are exploding on the scene from the direction of general education reform.

The federal approach to exercising leverage for innovation has often utilized a "systems change" approach. An important example of this approach can be found in the local school district partnerships that were funded through the School-to-Work Opportunities Act in 1994. The general purpose of this act is to prepare all students, with or without disabilities, for work or further education after leaving high school. Congress stipulated that all efforts supported through the School-to-Work Opportunities Act should somehow be coordinated with general education reform efforts, such as those stipulated in Goals 2000 (Benz & Kochhar, 1996).

Another example of the federal commitment to a systems change approach for general school reform can be found in the Obey-Porter Act of 1998, which provides substantial funds for comprehensive school reform demonstrations. The initial appropriation was $125 million for Title 1 schools plus an additional $25 million for any schools. Award recipients received a minimum of $50,000 per year for up to three years. As of April 1999, after the first round of funding, 44 states had received $122.6 million to support projects in 2311 schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1999b).

What is perhaps most intriguing about these projects is the manner in which the term *comprehensive* has been defined and operationalized. Each applicant for a grant was required to address the following funding criteria:

Rebottling, continued on page 11

Rebottling, continued from page 10

- Adopt a school reform model that is backed by research findings concerning its effectiveness.
- Incorporate a comprehensive design that includes instruction, student assessment, classroom management, professional development, parental involvement, and school management and technology, all within a reform model that addresses student achievement of high standards.
- Provide high quality and continuous teacher and staff professional development.
- Stipulate measurable goals for student performance and benchmarks for meeting the goals.
- Provide evidence that the effort is supported by faculty, administrators and staff.
- Provide for the meaningful involvement of parents and other community members in planning and implementing activities.
- Utilize high quality external technical support from a school reform expert.
- Include a plan for evaluation of the implementation of school reforms and student results achieved.
- Identify how other resources will be available and utilized to sustain the effort after the seed money is gone.

It is too early to tell whether funded projects will actually address all of these criteria effectively, but the intent is obvious: Use the seed money for restructuring purposes, in a manner that will sustain the innovations over time once the federal dollar disappears.

So where do we stand at this point in time? Fifty years ago we left general education and created special education, believing that this approach was necessary to address adequately the educational needs of students with disabilities. During 40 of these years, we focused some of our attention on high school students with disabilities, and for the past 15 years we have labeled this approach *transition.* From the beginning, our efforts have been anchored in an outcome vision that includes employment, independent living, the establishment of social networks, and student satisfaction as appropriate goals of education, in addition to traditional academics at the highest level possible for each student. We have developed programs to support this vision, and some of them are quite good. We have explored ways of empowering students, families and teachers to implement such programs effectively. And now we stand at a crossroad where our own discretionary funds seem to be declining and general education reform has become the focus of our national interest in education.

How should we proceed in a way that acknowledges both of these realities? Very cautiously. With our limited funds, we must continue to develop and promote a complete high school curriculum that includes both traditional academics but also the components of successful transition programs that we have so painstakingly developed over the past 40 years. We must do what we can to redirect a reasonable portion of special education discretionary funds in support of transition programs, pointing out to anyone who cares how dramatically these funds have declined during recent years. We must also be clever in accessing those funds earmarked for people with disabilities that are still available from OSEP and other federal agencies, but perhaps are not labeled specifically as "transition" funds. And yes, we must find many ways of effectively becoming part of the general education reform movement, including meaningful participation in both the planning and implementation of such reforms at the local, state and national levels. Transition needs are not unique to students with disabilities. We need to help our colleagues who share this perception, while acknowledging that collaboration and classroom inclusion are not identical concepts. We can work together to achieve common goals without requiring that students with and without disabilities must always sit next to one another in the classroom or other learning environment.

Is it time for another rebottling? Current policy and funding initiatives strongly suggest that the answer is *yes.* The old wine, still robust and full of flavor, is what we have learned about secondary special education and transition programs over the past 40 years. The new bottle is general education reform. If we can rebottle the old wine, preserving the best of what we have created and refined over time, its further development and eventual presentation from the new bottle just might be an experience worth celebrating.

Andrew S. Halpem is a professor at the University of Oregon, College of Education.