

## Transition: Not Just for Students!

Cheryl Henderson, M.Ed.,  
Co-Director, VDOE T/TAC @ JMU

**T**ransition involves a process of movement or change. One may move from one form, state, activity, condition, or environment to another. When we discuss transition in special education, most frequently we are referring to early transition – where the child moves from early intervention (infant and toddler programs) to preschool programs or from preschool programs to school-age programs, or secondary transition – where the student moves from high school to post-secondary education or employment. Rous, Gooden, & McCormick (2007), of the National Early Childhood Transition Center at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, identify transition as being: 1) horizontal, whereby services are provided from multiple programs during the day or week or there are services from multiple providers during the day or week within the same program, and 2) vertical, in which students move from one program to another at a certain point in time (pre-k to k, elementary to middle, middle to high, high to post-secondary); private program or agency to public program or agency. Regardless of the type of transition, students are not the only ones experiencing change. The roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals have certainly moved through a transition process, both horizontally and vertically, over the past several decades.

When school divisions first began hiring paraprofessionals, clerical duties such as attendance and record-keeping, housekeeping tasks, monitoring activities (playgrounds, study halls, lunch rooms), and preparing materials were their most frequent activities. The advent of widespread early childhood programs such as Head Start, and remedial (Title 1) and special education programs increased the numbers of personnel hired in the schools

as paraprofessionals. Gradually, roles and responsibilities have gone through a transition to include a greater emphasis on direct instruction and support services. This movement or change in programs or services has brought about new opportunities for knowledge and skill acquisition for the paraprofessional. Pickett, Faison, Formanek, & Woods (2006) identify similarities and differences among paraprofessional roles, especially as they relate to secondary transition programs. Paraprofessionals employed in transition and vocational education programs spend much of their time in off school site community learning or vocational training activities. Often, they will have more autonomy to adapt instructional strategies and methods to meet the needs of individual students. In addition, they may participate as active members of IEP/ITP team meetings and serve as liaisons between the school, employers, and personnel in other provider agencies. Paraprofessionals frequently communicate information and provide assistance to parents about their child's community program.

As the roles of the paraprofessional changes, it is important to utilize practices which support effective communication and relationships. Rous, Gooden, & McCormick (2007) offer numerous suggestions for school personnel to utilize when developing transition procedures and activities. School divisions must put into place methods to support staff to staff communication both within and across programs. A foundation of common language helps with understanding of roles and responsibilities. Clearly delineated staff roles and responsibilities for transition activities and making paraprofessionals aware of any regulations, policies, and procedures related to transition activities are vital for success. Staff training is necessary as responsibilities and assignments change.

To keep up with the role and responsibility changes (and to align with federal legislation that has requirements for paraprofessionals, such as in the No Child Left Behind act), many school divisions have increased requirements for the hiring of paraprofessionals, and offer training for

enhancing skills and knowledge once hired. In August 2005, the Virginia Department of Education made available to all school divisions several resources for paraprofessional professional development. *The Virginia Paraprofessional Guide to Supervision and Collaboration with Paraprofessionals: A Partnership* is available on the Virginia Department of Education web site at <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/sped/paraprofessional-guide.pdf>. This guide was developed to provide information and strategies to build strong, effective, supportive teams to ensure successful educational services for all students. The content from the guide was used to create another resource: five professional development workshops for paraprofessionals in elementary or secondary schools who work in special education programs. Objectives and goals of these workshops are aligned with standards created by the Council of Exceptional Children for paraprofessionals. Topics include Overview of Special Education Programs, Characteristics of Exceptional Learners, Supporting the Instructional Process, Supporting Positive Behaviors in the Classroom, and Collaboration and Communication. These workshops may be used as self-study or as group inservices. The self-study workshops may be accessed through TTAC Online at <[http://www.ttaonline.org/staff/s\\_training/s\\_training\\_para.asp](http://www.ttaonline.org/staff/s_training/s_training_para.asp)>. The workshops were also formatted on CD, complete with lecture notes, PowerPoint slides, and activities, and distributed to every school division in the Commonwealth.

Whatever the assignment, a successful program will support paraprofessionals in gaining the necessary information and knowledge regarding their role, the special education process, curriculum, and available resources. Transition: It's not just for students anymore!

### Resources & References:

National Center for Early Development & Learning  
<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl>

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition  
<http://www.ncset.org>

National Early Childhood Transition Research  
and Training Center  
<http://www.ihdi.uky.edu/nectc>

Terrific Transitions: Supporting Children's  
Transition to Kindergarten  
<http://www.terrifictransitions.org>

Pickett, A.L., Faison, K., Formanek, J., & Woods, J. (2006). *A core curriculum and training program to prepare paraeducators to work in transitional services and supported employment programs* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services.

Rous, B., & Hallam, R. (2006). *Tools for transition in early childhood: A step-by-step guide for agencies, teachers, and families*. Baltimore: Brookes.

Rous, B., Gooden, C., & McCormick, K. (2007, October). *Tools and strategies for supporting transition and school readiness*. Presentation at the Annual International Conference on Young Children with Special Needs and Their Families, Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada.

*What Works Data Brief: A Report from the What Works Transition Research Synthesis Project*. (2002, December). Retrieved January 8, 2008, from <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=714>

\*\*\*\*\*

ECSE Paraprofessionals: Mark your calendar for the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Content Teaching Academy at James Madison University, June 23-27, 2008. For the first time, there will be an academy for ECSE paraprofessionals! Visit <http://www.jmu.edu/contentacademy> for more information and registration.