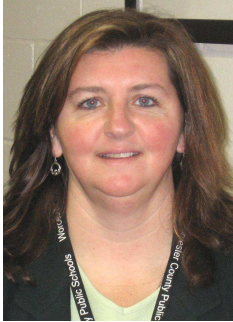


Helping Students Transition to an Independent Life

By Kristine Dodd, Transitioning Teacher at Cedar Chapel Special School



According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, “students with disabilities must have an education provided to them that is designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living.” To help special needs students make the transition from school to independent living, Worcester County Public Schools has implemented a successful transitioning program. Through transition planning, coupled with the support of team members and parents, students with disabilities begin their transition to a more independent life.

Team members involved in transition planning may include the student, family, education and support staff, and community members. The team works together to develop the student’s transition plan.

According to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), transition is the passage from one stage of development to another. For students with disabilities at Cedar Chapel Special School (CCSS), as well as our three high schools, the process for transitioning to the workforce is comprehensive, relevant, and ongoing, thus meeting the needs of each individual student. Through a transitioning plan, each student will have individualized goals and needs identified. As required by Maryland law, the transitioning process begins when a student becomes 14.

The transition plan typically begins with identifying student interests, needs or preferences and developing ideas for post-school outcomes, such as a career. The plan may include establishing community access, as well as identifying needed support services. It may also outline future supports needed from team members. The ultimate goal in moving a student from school to the workforce is to make the transition for a student with disabilities as seamless as possible.

When developing a transition plan, the setting after graduation is discussed by team members. The setting, for example, may include independent living and integrated employment, or it may include continued practice on skills for independent living.

Students attending CCSS begin vocational training in the secondary setting at our school. Participating students have access to a family living classroom that has all the amenities of home including a full kitchen, laundry facilities and recreational living space. Students learn to prepare meals, wash clothes, and set up a family living area to learn basic housekeeping skills. Students also begin to do work-tasks around the school. Work tasks might include activities such as removing trash, cleaning tables, sweeping, dust mopping and cleaning windows. Students may also participate in tasks such as watering plants or gardening.

After students have participated in the vocational program at CCSS for at least one school year, they may begin to transition to a supported employment setting in the community. A job coach will be at each location to support and supervise the safety and enrichment of each student. This program is called the Work Experience Program (WEP). Students begin job sampling while at CCSS through a variety of jobs both in the school building and throughout locations in the community. WEP is very important because it prepares and teaches students with disabilities to access the supports and services they will need to become as independent as possible.

Community businesses are necessary to provide a variety of job experiences for our students. Currently, students may work at one of the local schools, the Worcester County Recreation and Parks Department, Eastern Shore Lanes, Friendly's, or at the Pocomoke YMCA. These business partners care very deeply about our students and look forward to the assistance our students provide while at their place of business.

Doing a positive job at each community site allows our program to continue to grow. This, in turn, increases job options for our students. Working in the community where a student lives allows the student to meet community members – an opportunity which otherwise may not have existed. In addition, working within the community enables a student to learn a job skill at a place of business, with the hope of getting a job there upon graduation.

Marsheila Shockley, a job coach in the Work Experience Program, explained that she has watched students mature and grow as a result of working in the community. “It offers them hands-on practice that they will need as they mature,” said Shockley. “The program also offers

students real-life experiences for their future.” TJ Jones, a student in the WEP, agrees. “I have fun at work and like being able to see the people while I am working,” said TJ.

If you have any questions about our Transitioning Program or the Work Experience Program, you may contact me at Cedar Chapel Special School at 410-632-5230.