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in Australia**

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Australian Association of Special Education, National Conference 2009

Where Have All Our Students Gone? School to Postschool Transition in Australia

Denis Meadows

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Thank you for the invitation to deliver the Des English Memorial Lecture. As a young junior teacher I knew Des English and am well aware of the contributions he made to special education in Victoria and nationally.

Reading a number of the Des English memorial lectures delivered over the years, a central theme seems to be one of progress, over time, about what has been achieved and how the lives of persons with a disability have been changed by special education professionals. The creation of change in behaviour that brings about more positive outcomes in lifestyle for persons with a disability is the core business of special education and, as I say to my students, if you don't think you can create positive behaviour change in your students you should go off and do something else. As many of the papers delivered at this conference will assert, the points at which the effects of our efforts to create behaviour change and positive outcomes for students are more visible at the various points of transition in their school lives. The transition point where outcomes are brought more sharply into focus is the transition from school to postschool, for it is here that the immediate outcomes of the transition are highly predictive of where graduating students will spend the remainder of their lives. This is, of course, not to deny the important contribution that the preparations for earlier transitions made to this change to adult life, but it is this aspect of our students' journey along the continuum from childhood to adulthood that has been of interest to me. My interest in school-to-postschool transition first arose as a teacher in a junior vocational high school and later as a special school principal in Canada and my association with Professor Roy Brown, who achieved so much in improving the quality of life for young adults with disabilities via the Vocational Research and Rehabilitation Institute at the University of Calgary. His influence in this regard remains highly visible in the province of Alberta to the present day.

So, I would like to make some comments on three things. First, what does Australian research into school-to-postschool transition tell us about outcomes for students with an intellectual disability once they have left school? Second, I would like to present some data collected in a study conducted in Queensland in 2005/06 by myself and colleagues from Griffith University on the postschool outcomes for

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students with an intellectual impairment (II), intellectual impairment and autistic spectrum disorder (II/ASD) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). In addition to some quantitative data, this study also included qualitative data on the transition process gleaned from the perspective of the parents of these students. Finally I would like to make some observations on what these data suggest might be required to improve postschool outcomes and quality of life for these students.

Australian Studies on School-to-Postschool Transition and Student Outcomes

Employment Rates for Persons with a Disability in Australia

In 2005, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) as a part of their National Enquiry into Employment and Disability, came to the view, not unsurprisingly, that there are still barriers to employment for persons with a disability in Australia. In 2003, 53.2% of people with disabilities participated in the labour force as compared to 80.6% of those without a disability. Since 1993, the labour-force participation rate of people with disabilities has fallen, while the rate for people without disabilities has risen. The report identified 4.8% of all persons with a disability in Australia as having an intellectual or developmental disability, but does not differentiate between employment rates for this group and the majority of persons with a disability. As data from our Queensland study will later reveal, employment rates for this subgroup are likely to be significantly lower than for the disability group as a whole. In addition, the report identified that not only are people with a disability underrepresented in employment, but they are underrepresented in vocational educational and training systems and that this situation is exacerbated by poor links between state-administered disability school and postschool programs, and Commonwealth-funded disability employment options. One specific issue mentioned in the report was that many persons with a disability remain trapped in Business Services, where their transition to open employment is not well supported. The identification of this problem associated with 'flow through' models of postschool options is not of recent origin and was identified by Tom Bellamy and his group in Oregon nearly 30 years ago.

Further, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that in 2003 Australia ranked 13 out of 19 countries on the employment rate for persons with a disability; lowest of 16 countries on the percentage of people on disability related benefit who were employed; and highest of 16 countries on the percentage of people receiving disability related benefit who were not engaged in any formal work. The OECD noted that the employment rates for persons with a disability in Australia were disappointing given the growth of the Australian economy over recent years.

The above situation suggests that the interface between the school system and the postschool world of work might not be working as well as it might and that there is a need for more interagency collaboration at both government and nongovernment levels.

A search of the databases of peer-refereed journals seeking Australian studies on school-to-postschool transition practices and postschool outcomes for students with a developmental disability brings fairly slim pickings. As far as I know there is no comprehensive review of Australian transition practices and postschool outcomes for students with a disability comparable to Kohler and Chapman's (1999) review of the US literature, so as a part of our Positive Outcomes study in Queensland we included a section on Australian studies that went back to the early 1990s, and I would like to briefly review that literature now.

The NSW Transition Initiative

One of the most significant and influential projects addressing the components of the transition process and student outcomes began 20 years ago in New South Wales (NSW). The transition project began as a pilot in 1989 led to several reports describing its features and outcomes (Parmenter & Riches, 1990; Riches, 1996; Riches, Parmenter & Robinson, 1996; Riches, Parmenter, Fegent, & Bailey, 1993; Riches, 1993; Riches & Parmenter, 1993; Watters, Riches, & Parmenter, 1993). The transition initiative has undergone changes and refinements and has influenced the delivery of transition services in schools, communities, and government and nongovernment education authorities throughout NSW and through networks with other states and territories (see Riches, 1996 for a comprehensive review). The initiative began in special education settings (special schools and special classes) and extended to mainstream settings in government and nongovernment schools.

The transition initiative incorporated many of the key features identified as best practice in transition, including, as listed by Riches (1996, p. 74):

- commitment and support at the central policy and funding level
- development and implementation of individual transition planning, involving students, parents/caregivers, advocates, teachers and community agency personnel
- the provision of relevant and appropriate school curricula and instruction
- access to and provision of appropriate adult services, including meaningful training and employment options postschool
- liaison with and linkage of students to postschool options prior to leaving school
- ongoing professional development
- community involvement and local planning
- interagency cooperation and collaboration at all levels.

Many of the specific practices Riches (1996) reported as being developed and adopted by the transition project related to student-focused planning. Strategies included the preparation of students, parents, teachers, and advocates prior to transition planning meetings, using strategies such as role-plays and easy to follow checklists; the involvement of interpreters and other advocates such as Aboriginal Liaison Officers in the preparation and planning stages where necessary; and the option of a nonschool location for the planning meeting. In addition, school-based and community-based teams identified and collated information about the availability of adult services and set up computerised service directories for students, parents, and educators.

The majority of students received a largely functional curriculum, with an emphasis on life skills rather than a traditional academic curriculum. Curriculum choices were made under the individual transition planning process to reflect the needs, preferences, and interests of the student. Students were provided with occupationally oriented vocational training both at school and in community sites during their final years of high school. The vocational training programs built on school work-experience programs and included job coaching (see Watters et al., 1993), enclaves, work crews, and TAFE courses (see Riches & Parmenter, 1993). Most students spent a substantial amount of time in vocational training. For example, of the 57 students in the postschool outcomes sample, 61% had spent over 40% of their time, and 45% had spent over half their time, in vocational training activities during their final year of high school (Riches et al., 1993, p. 30).

The strengthening of interagency collaboration was seen as a critical feature of the transition project, which established teams working together at the individual, school, community, and central policy and planning levels. Riches (1993, 1994, 1996) reported that in the early stages of the pilot project it became apparent that, although classroom teachers and relevant school personnel had been trained and assisted to implement transition processes, additional staffing was needed if effective communication and liaison among stakeholders were to be ensured; consequently, part-time transition coordinator positions were established. The creation of these dedicated transition coordinator positions was identified as a key feature contributing to the successful implementation of the transition project.

Professional development was also seen as a vital element of the transition program, and needs in this area were addressed through field-based staff training by transition coordinators. Other professional development activities included local and regional workshops, national conferences, and involvement in university professional development courses in transition (Riches, 1996).

A follow-up study of the first cohort of students involved in the transition project in 1989 and 1990 gathered data on the transition and postschool outcomes of 57 of the original 98 students (Riches et al., 1993). The majority (84%) of the 57 young people had intellectual impairments, 11% had physical disabilities and 5% had multiple disabilities. Postschool outcomes included employment at award wages for 32% of the former students surveyed and in what were then called sheltered workshops for 19%. Almost half were not employed, and 15 of these spent their days at home with few structured activities. Ten (18%) of the sample had enrolled in postsecondary education and training. Type and degree of disability were associated with employment outcomes, with individuals with mild intellectual impairments most likely to be in full-time award wage employment. Of the 57 former students surveyed, a total of 79% had been involved in occupationally oriented skill based vocational training while at school. Thirty-four of these students had attended TAFE courses and 10 had received on-the-job instruction with job coaches. The authors emphasised the importance of this occupationally oriented training to employment outcomes. In a further evaluation of the TAFE transition courses developed, Riches and Parmenter (1993) reported that, in a time of high youth unemployment in NSW, 24 (71%) of the group of 34 who had participated in TAFE transition courses had held employment in at least one job since leaving school. In addition, of the total sample, only those students who had attended TAFE while at school were found to have enrolled in postschool education or training.

Riches et al. (1993) stressed that their findings must be interpreted with caution because the sample size was small, time since leaving school was short, and many students had received only minimal aspects of the transition program, which was then in its initial stages. In addition, because the majority of those who could not be contacted for the follow-up survey were young people with mild or moderate intellectual impairment, the sample contained a larger percentage of youths with higher support needs than the original population. The NSW transition project has initiated and developed many internationally identified best practices in schools throughout NSW and its early outcome findings were promising.

In a second more comprehensive study of students impacted by the NSW transition initiative, (Riches, Parmenter & Robertson, 1996) 544 students who had left school between 1989 and 1993 were interviewed either directly or through their caregivers on a variety of aspects of their postschool lives including living arrangements, income

support, recreation and leisure, transport, and employment patterns. Results indicated that although the transition initiative had assisted many students to improve their postschool outcomes, variable outcomes indicated that there were still many barriers to be overcome before postschool quality of life for students with a disability approached that enjoyed by peers who do not have a disability.

More recently, a review of the evaluation reports of seven transition programs across five states of Australia was reported in the journal *Disability and Society* (Laragy, 2004). The programs primarily served young people with intellectual impairments. Only two of the seven programs served students still at school: the South Coast Transition Model in Queensland (Clarke, 1994) and the Startright program in South Australia (Hudson, Carr, Dowsett, & Moroney, 2000); the other five programs provided postschool services only. Focusing particularly on the extent to which self-determination principles were evident in the programs, Laragy found that all of the programs placed a strong emphasis on the involvement of young people and their families in transition planning and decision-making, resulting in 'increased service responsiveness and greater achievement of preferred outcomes' (p. 519). She also reported the challenges involved in implementing student-focused planning and self-determination practices; for example, 'an increasing demand for resources creates pressures for more bureaucratic and less person-oriented approaches' (p. 519).

The South Coast Transition Model

Of the two programs serving high school students, outcome data were available only for the South Coast Transition Model (SCTM). Postschool outcome information for the students exiting the five special schools served by the SCTM was provided by Clarke (1994). Of the 57 students who left school from 1992 to Semester 1, 1994 and who had the possibility of a work outcome (other students had transferred to other schools, moved interstate, or had serious health problems), 37 (66%) had full-time employment, three were in part-time employment, and five were attending vocational courses.

Several key features of the SCTM reflected best transition practices in the areas of self-determination, student-focused planning, family involvement, interagency collaboration, and program structures. The program included clear goals to empower students and their families and to maximise their involvement. For instance, activity sheets were sent home to families to prepare the student and parents or caregivers for sharing the student's vision and goals for the future at planning meetings. Students entered the program at the age of 14 or older, when they were commencing their final years of schooling. Strong links were established with employment services, and staff participated in the development, implementation, and maintenance of local employment pilot schemes. Evaluation was incorporated into the program, with schools formally tracking postschool outcomes. The vision driving the program was articulated and was clearly an important factor in its implementation and consisted of three operating principles (Clarke, 1994).

The first involved empowerment of individuals and families by giving them clear responsibilities and roles, accurate information on postschool services and support with difficulties experienced in accessing services. The second involved a planned approach which was driven by the vision and goals of individual students and included strong links with postschool services, 'hands on' support for schools, and the provision of strategic planning through area disability advisory groups. Finally,

accountability to individuals and the system involving follow-up on the realisation of goals contained in student transition plans.

Many of these guiding principles involve practices and principles identified in the international literature (e.g., Kohler & Field, 2003) as indicative of best practice in transition. Outcome data reported by Clarke, applying only to the early years of operation of the SCTM, were promising.

Startright — Transition from School-to-Postschool Options for Students With a Disability

The report of the Startright project did not include any outcome data, but did draw conclusions and make recommendations for the future. This South Australian pilot project, funded by the Department of Education, Training and Employment, the Commonwealth Department of Families and Community Services, Centrelink Disability Services Office, Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, Intellectual Disability Services Council, and the Association of Competitive Employment South Australia, investigated how well a cohort of 24 students with unspecified disabilities made the transition from school-to-postschool options during their last year of attending school (Hudson et al., 2000). Issues such as how students and schools planned for transition, what information they had about postschool options and agencies, how links to these agencies were made, and how the students' families were involved in the process comprised the aims for the project.

Although the project made no attempt to link its observations directly to student outcomes, the project experience was used to make recommendations for the future. These recommendations addressed a number of issues:

- Multiple definitions of disability cause confusion and attempts to standardise definitions would assist with accessing the postschool system.
- Funding arrangements tended to mitigate against postschool providers being formally involved in the transition process.
- Collaboration between schools and postschool services is essential.
- Although the components of postschool transition programs were diverse and open to debate, employment experiences and community integration skills were important.
- Transition involves long-term collaborative planning.
- Systemic issues regarding the involvement of postschool agencies and government funding bodies in the transition process need to be examined and addressed.

Detailed guidelines for transition planning for individual students were also provided in the report.

The Western Australian Transition Support Program

A report of a Western Australian transition program examined the implementation of four transition support models in 20 secondary schools (Centre for Disability Research and Development, 1995). A majority (76%) of the 189 students involved were reported as having intellectual disabilities. Model 1 involved full- or part-time Transition Support Officers (TSOs); Model 2 used class teachers as TSOs; Model 3 involved a coordinator with contracted specialist agencies to provide transition support, work experience and job placement; and Model 4 involved a relief teacher acting as TSO.

Time allocated to various activities, such as Individual Transition Plan formulation, career education and independent living skills curricula, work experience, contact with external agencies, and professional development, was assessed. It was found that Model 1 devoted a significantly greater amount of time to most of the transition activities. Model 1 appeared most appropriate to the program's stated objectives, and one of the report's recommendations was the continuation and further development of this model involving the employment of Transition Support Officers. Findings from feedback questionnaires from stakeholders, including parents, teachers, TSOs and agencies, indicated a perception of considerable benefits for the students from the program in the areas of improved self-esteem, encouraging independence through work experience and independent living skills, and the promotion of relationships between students, parents, teachers and agencies. The role of the TSO was seen as an integral part of the success of the program. Apart from this rather general evaluation of the program through measuring time spent on activities and stakeholder satisfaction, no clear outcomes of the program were assessed.

The South Australian Study on Transition to Supported Employment for Students With a Disability

A study funded by the Regional Assistance Program of the Commonwealth Government Department of Transport and Regional Services, the Australian Council for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled (ACROD) South Australian Division, the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services and the Golden Grove High school in Adelaide South Australia, investigated strategies that promoted the successful transition of students with a disability to supported employment in business services (Wade, 2003). In Australia, the terms 'Business Services', 'Supported Workplaces', and 'Supported Employment' are used interchangeably to describe services that are funded by the Commonwealth Government and run by community agencies to provide employment for persons with a wide range of disabilities. These places of employment were formerly known as 'Sheltered Workshops'.

The aim of the study was to 'explore some of the examples of good practice that currently exist in supporting young people with a disability move from school to work, to develop a transition strategy that incorporates a model of best practice, and to facilitate the uptake of the strategy by key stakeholders in South Australia' (Wade, 2003, p. 13). At the time of reporting, 76% of employees in Business Services in South Australia had an intellectual impairment. However, Business Services Managers indicated that there was a surplus of people with an intellectual disability who had high support needs and a shortage of persons with higher-level skills.

The report details a number of case studies from several states. The main features of each are listed below.

South Australia Business Services Partnership Model

This model involved partnerships between business services and schools where students received intensive pre-employment theory and some practical skills at school in areas such as computing, interviewing skills, independent travel, planning, communication, personal presentation, and occupational health and safety. These skills were put into practice in a work experience situation. Students received feedback on their progress and an exit interview at the completion of their work experience. One business service funded this transition activity with a view to recruitment of future employees. There was no report of disability type, age or long-term outcomes for students involved in the program.

The Tasmanian Gate Project

Funding was provided to train Vocational Education and Training Coordinators and Co-workers in two worksites to support work experience for students with a disability. The project emphasized the preparation of students prior to work placement, and training and information were provided free to employers. Types of student disability and outcomes for students were not reported.

Western Adelaide Vocational Enterprise Lighthouse Project

This project was funded by the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation and case-based funding from the Commonwealth Department of Families and Community Services with the aim of increasing participation of young people with disabilities in Vocational Education and Training leading to employment. The project supported students in a combined certificate in retail operations and employment skills with a significant component of structured workplace learning. Type of disability or the age of the students were not reported, but 18 students gained full-time jobs, traineeships, part-time jobs, or part-time apprenticeships at the end of the program. The average cost of supporting a student through the program was \$2,537.

NSW Work-Out Project

This project trialed two models of support for students with a disability in work placements: the first model involved the training of employees at workplaces to act as 'co-workers', and the second involved training teacher aides to support students in work experience placements and at school. Although both systems provided positive results, the majority of employers preferred to use their own staff to support the students and only a minority of students were found to need the assistance of a teacher aide. Type of disability and long-term outcomes for employment were not reported.

Queensland New Apprenticeships Partnership for Students with Disabilities — Gold Coast

This initiative was a continuation and development of the South Coast Transition Model (Clarke, 1994) described earlier. The partnership was established between Queensland state government schools and service providers with the aim of assisting students with a disability to gain and maintain traineeships or apprenticeships in the Gold Coast region. Students with a disability and ascertained at levels 4–6 under the then existing Queensland system of ascertainment were eligible for the program. Students with both high and low support needs were included. Students and families were involved in the planning of transition goals. In each year of the project, approximately 70% of students who set vocational or non-vocational goals were reported to have achieved them. Types of student disability were not reported.

Overall, this report on international and Australian practice revealed four major themes:

- Participation in meaningful work experience well before a student exits school is viewed as an essential ingredient of a successful transition program.
- Partnerships between school transition programs and local agencies who provide postschool employment and other services is highly predictive of successful transition outcomes.
- The existence of, and student participation in, preparation of the transition plan is essential.

- Family involvement in the transition process is essential.

The report concludes by proposing a Transition Model Operational Cycle for students with a disability moving to employment and sets down a number of recommendations designed to promote more successful transition outcomes. These are:

- that formal, resourced partnerships between ACROD, the department of education, and independent schools be established
- that the transition model developed in the report be adopted by both government and non-government education systems
- that transition issues be given priority within education systems
- that schools and Business Services be proactive in the provision of accurate information about their operations to students and parents involved in transition education
- that annual planning sessions and a biennial conference be held to maintain networks and discuss emerging trends and developments in transition education.

Although these reports of Australian programs are descriptive and contain little detailed analysis relating specific practices to outcomes, they provide some evidence of the effectiveness of incorporating identified best practice features in transition programs.

Western Australia Down Syndrome Study

This study reported on postschool outcomes for 95 adolescents and young adults with Down syndrome in Western Australia. This was a part of a larger study of 363 individuals ranging in age from less than 12 months to 25 years that investigated medial issues, functional abilities social relationships and employment outcomes (Dyke, Leonard, Bourke, Bennington, & Bower, 2007). Two-thirds of these school-leavers were engaged in regular day activities outside of the home that did not involve paid employment. No data are given on the number of hours each week individuals were engaged in these activities. Although 70% of these individuals reported being engaged in some paid work during the previous 12 months, again no data on level of remuneration or hours of work were given.

Persons with Autism

Two studies were found that dealt with students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). One investigated postschool outcomes while the other described a school to work training program.

The outcomes study (Burrows, Ford, & Bottroff, 2001) investigated employment, further education, day option programs, structured social, recreational and leisure activities, transitional services, and networks of support for 28 persons with ASD who had been out of school for at least one year. Approximately half of the participants had a moderate to severe intellectual disability. Almost half were employed, but mostly in sheltered or supported employment. Further, 21% of the participants attended day activity programs. Most lived at home and reported that their parents or guardians were the key persons who supported their access to postschool activities. No data are given on wages earned, hours of work or whether the participants were in receipt of the Disability Support Pension.

The study describing the school to work training program (Lynch, 2005) related how a number of students with ASD attended a transition program for one day a week. The program emphasised the development of the students' knowledge, skills and understanding of workplace requirements within the context of a TAFE accredited

program on preparation for work. Students also participated in work experience. Different students participated in the program for periods varying from one to three years. Anecdotal and qualitative data describe student achievements and how the schools attended by the students improved their transition education strategies however, no data were given concerning the actual postschool outcomes for the students.

What's Possible in Employment: An Australian Example

Evidence from overseas indicates that with adequate training and supports persons with significant disabilities can be successful in employment. Australia's largest open employment agency for people with moderate intellectual impairment, Jobsupport Inc have experienced great success with their Community Work Options (CWO) program for school leavers with a moderate intellectual impairment who were unable to move directly to open employment. The CWO program is a collaborative effort between Jobsupport Inc and the New South Wales Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care. As of July 2007, 130 persons had completed the program and 72% had moved to an open employment placement. Eighty-two per cent of these workers are still employed and earn an average of \$243 per week. Forty-eight per cent of these workers earn full award wages (*CWO Updates, 2007*).

In order to achieve these outcomes, Jobsupport subscribe to the following strategies:

1. Real work settings are used rather than classrooms:
 - Extended carefully supported work experiences are conducted in real work places.
2. Training towards agreed transition goals rather than a pre-established curriculum:
 - The CWO program uses individual transition planning. These transition goals are consistent with the individual's interests and abilities and are agreed upon between Jobsupport and the individual.
3. The use of skilled and experienced staff:
 - CWO managers have a great deal of experience with placing and maintaining people with a disability in the workplace. University-accredited training is provided to all staff.
4. A strong link to an effective open employment service that provides ongoing support and training:
 - The CWO program uses the resources of the Jobsupport network to place and support the workers upon graduation.

The Jobsupport organisation has used the results of research available on employment training for people with disabilities from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Centre on Workplace supports located at Virginia Commonwealth University. The results obtained by Jobsupport for their clients seem to suggest that anchoring transition practices in the results of research goes a long way towards achieving more positive outcomes.

Predicting Transition Outcomes

A study sponsored by the New South Wales Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care investigated student characteristics associated with counsellors from the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service predictions on future capacity for work (Eagar, Green, Gordon, Owen, Masso, & Williams, 2006). They assessed over 1500 school leavers with a disability, of whom nearly 40% had an intellectual impairment. The study concluded that the single best predictor of capacity for work was the individual's

capacity to manage activities of daily living, and that these skills were hierarchical in nature. Although most of these students were assessed after they had left school, the study may provide some insights about the postschool effects of curriculum content for students over their final years of their education.

Postschool Outcomes for Students With a Disability in Queensland

In March 2002, the Ministerial Task Force on Inclusive Education was established to provide advice to the Queensland Government on how to make the schooling system more inclusive for students at educational risk because of a disability or a learning difficulty. In its report to the Minister for Education and the Arts in June 2004, the Task Force recommended that a rigorous research program be instigated examining the links between pedagogic practices in classrooms for students with disabilities and the outcomes achieved by these students.

To this end, the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts engaged a research team from Griffith University to examine the relationship between transition practices and postschool outcomes for students with II, ASD and II/ASD in a research project entitled ‘Quality Outcomes for Students with a Disability’ (Meadows, Alcorn, Beamish, Davies, Elias et al., 2006)

The project consisted of four activities. First, a review of international and Australian literature on factors associated with more positive postschool outcomes for students with a disability from 1998–2005 (Meadows, Punch, Elias, Beamish & Davies, 2005). This built on the seminal review of earlier literature by Kohler and Chapman, 1999. Second, a survey of parents of students who had left school between the years 2000–2005, enquiring about past-student employment and daytime activities and views on how the school transition program prepared their sons and daughters for postschool life. Third, a survey of current transition teachers investigating their levels of support for, and implementation of recommended transition practices identified from the literature review. Fourth, the conduct of focus groups conducted with families and students in one group, and educators and postschool service providers in another. Each part of the study was structured around Kohler’s Taxonomy (Kohler, 1996; Kohler & Field, 2003) that provided an organising heuristic for transition planning via the categories of Student Focused Planning, Student Involvement, Family Involvement, Interagency Collaboration and Program Structure. Today I will focus on the Parent Survey.

The Parent Survey

A total of 218 families responded to the parent survey. As no central record of graduating students existed, special schools and secondary schools with Special Education Units (SEUs) were contacted and asked to distribute the survey to families of school leavers with whom they still had contact. The survey consisted of four parts and sought information on past students’ demographics, paid employment, day activity other than paid work, and parents’ opinions on their child’s secondary schooling.

Characteristics of the Sample of Young Adults (Part A)

Part A of the questionnaire asked parents (on behalf of the young adults) to provide demographic information concerning age, gender, ethnicity, disability diagnosis, type of school attended, current living arrangements, and sources of income.

The majority of the sample of young adults were male, (60%, $n = 130$), with a modal age of 21 years. In terms of ethnicity, all but five were reported as having English as a first language, and all but eight were described as non-Indigenous. While at school, 72% of the young adults ($n = 152$) had been diagnosed as having II, and with the remaining 28% almost equally divided between diagnoses of ASD and II/ASD.

Half of the young adults had left school in the years 1998 to 2004. A majority (70%, $n = 153$) had left school at age 18 and most (98%, $n = 214$) had left by age 19. Sixty-nine per cent ($n = 150$) had attended state special schools, 23% SEUs attached to state secondary schools, 6% state secondary schools, and 2% independent and Catholic Schools. The majority of young adults (90%, $n = 194$) currently lived at home. The remaining individuals typically lived close to their parents (50% lived within 5 kilometres and 99% within 30 kilometres) in either residential accommodation or independently in the community.

Approximately 53% ($n = 113$) of young adults had received funds from Disability Services Queensland. Of this subset, almost a third ($n = 36$) used funds from Post School Services Program (formerly Moving Ahead). Only a minority of all young adults (13%, $N = 27$) had received some case-based funding from the Australian government in order to receive a service from a postschool service provider. The vast majority of young adults (93%, $n = 202$) were receiving a disability support pension from the Australian government, and 78% of these were receiving the maximum entitlement. These data suggest that most young adults earned less than the \$124 per fortnight allowable before deductions are made to the pension. Eight per cent of young adults no longer received a disability support pension, suggesting that they may be in full-time employment.

Open and Supported Paid Employment (Part B)

Part B of the questionnaire asked parents (on behalf of the young adults) to provide targeted information on open or supported employment experiences (type, length, additional comments) and weekly income.

Almost 25% of young adults ($n = 53$) had paid jobs in regular community settings. Of the total sample, 53% of those from state secondary and non-government schools were in paid employment, 44% from SEUs, and 15% from special schools. In all, 35 types of work were identified. The most frequently mentioned jobs were kitchen-hand ($n = 7$), working at Coles ($n = 3$), and shop assistant ($n = 3$).

The length of employment ranged from 2 months to 6 years, with approximately 63% ($n = 32$) reporting 2 years or less of paid employment in the community. Overall, 25% of young adults earned under \$50 per week, 21% between \$50 and \$100, 30% between \$100 and \$200, and 23% over \$200. Of young adults in open employment, 25% ($n = 13$) worked less than 10 hours per week, 37% between 10 and 20 hours, 17% between 20 and 30 hours, and 21% more than 30 hours. Twenty-six per cent had been employed in more than one paid job since leaving school.

Thirteen per cent of the total sample of young adults ($n = 28$) were currently employed by a community agency (labelled Business Services) that provided paid employment within their organisation. Of the total sample, 18% of those from state secondary and non-government schools were in supported employment, 8% from SEUs, and 14% from special schools. Sixty-three per cent ($n = 17$) of those in this type of employment earned less than \$50 per week, 30% between \$50 and \$100, 7% between \$100 and \$200. Eleven per cent of these individuals worked for less than 10 hours per week, 33% between 10 and 20 hours, 33% between 20 and 30 hours and 23% over 30 hours. However, fewer than half ($n = 13$) of those in supported employment had more

than one other job since leaving school. The most commonly reported jobs ($N = 4$) included work at Endeavour Foundation and kitchen-hand.

More than 10% ($n = 22$) of parents made comment regarding the open or supported employment of their young adult. Comments overall addressed the positive and negative aspects of these types of employment. Some positive comments conveyed the view that participation in work was a worthwhile experience despite only small amounts of money being earned. For example, 'My son works at (name removed) Business service. I believe the wage my son receives is not important — he has a purpose in life/a reason to get up in the morning'. In contrast, other parents made it clear that payment for work completed was insufficient. 'She works 42 hours a fortnight and receives \$49.00'.

Activities Other than Paid Work (Part C)

Part C of the questionnaire asked parents (on behalf of the young adults) to provide broad information about engagement in community-based programs, tertiary education, and more general daily activities.

More than 50% of the young adults ($n = 110$) currently attended a centre-based day program with no resultant income. Of the total sample, 27% of those from state secondary and nongovernment schools attended a day program, 16% from SEUs, and 68% from special schools. Approximately 20% ($n = 19$) of the subset attended centres for less than 10 hours per week, 50% between 10 and 20 hours, and the remainder attended for 20 hours or more. Activities of the highest frequency were (a) community outings and (b) life-skills, physical, and arts programs.

Approximately 22% ($n = 47$) of young adults attended a tertiary institution. A comparison across school types indicates little difference in tertiary participation (25% from state secondary and non-government schools, 22% from SEUs, and 21% from special schools). More than 70% ($n = 35$) of this subset attended TAFE, with the majority studying a certificate course. Remaining individuals at TAFE were typically undertaking either vocational access or numeracy/literacy courses. In contrast, 7% ($n = 3$) of the subset were enrolled in a university degree or diploma.

The vast majority of young adults (83%, $n = 180$) engaged in community activities, with the largest subset ($n = 71$) participating in these activities for 2–5 hours per week. Ten per cent of the sample was reported to have no community contact, while 14% spent less than 2 hours each week in this activity. In contrast, 21% of past students spent between 5 and 10 hours weekly in community contact and 19% more than 10 hours. In the main, most young adults (55%, $n = 113$) required substantial amounts (much to a great deal) of supervision to engage in these activities. Moreover, over a third of young adults ($n = 73$) typically interacted minimally (not at all to a little) with other community members.

Sixty-four comments were made regarding community activities, with a balance of positive and negative perspectives. Comments were analysed using Leximancer 2.2 (Smith, 2005), a software package that generates a series of automatic analyses of responses, converting them into semantic patterns displayed in word frequency lists and two-dimensional concept maps.

Positive themes referred to activities that individuals enjoyed, including Special Olympics, movies, and outings, while negative themes related to lack of support, the need for supervision, and issues regarding the disproportionate amount of time at home and at work.

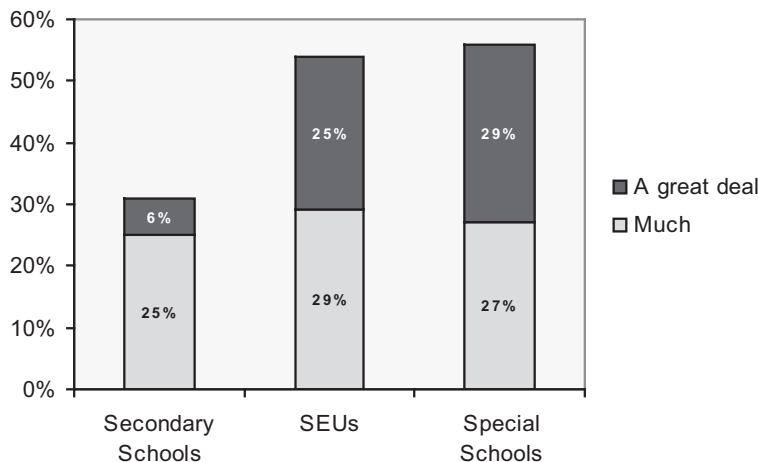


FIGURE 1
A comparison of preparation for employment ratings (much to a great deal) across school types.

Comments on Secondary School Program (Part D)

Part D of the questionnaire asked parents to provide information on work experiences at school, extent of school preparation for transitioning to postschool life, involvement of parents, school leavers, and teachers in goal-setting for postschool life, and outcomes related to postschool satisfaction with life and family adjustment.

Two-thirds of young adults ($n = 147$) had participated in work experiences while at school. For this subset, the frequency of work experiences ranged from 1 to 10, with an average of 3 work experiences.

Of the total sample, 82% of those from state secondary and nongovernment schools were involved in work experience at school, 86% from SEUs, and 59% from special schools. Table 1 shows both the mean and median of hours of work experience per week and the number of weeks spent on each work experience. The median provides a more accurate picture of duration of work experiences because a small number of young adults involved in lengthy experiences skewed the mean.

The extent of school preparation for transitioning to postschool life was examined specifically in terms of preparation for employment, community activities, and daily

TABLE 1
Duration of Work Experience

Number of work experiences	Hours per week for each work experience		Number of weeks for each work experience	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
1	6.9	4	13	8
2	6.8	4	14.5	10
3	6.1	4	11.8	8
4	5.4	4	12.3	8

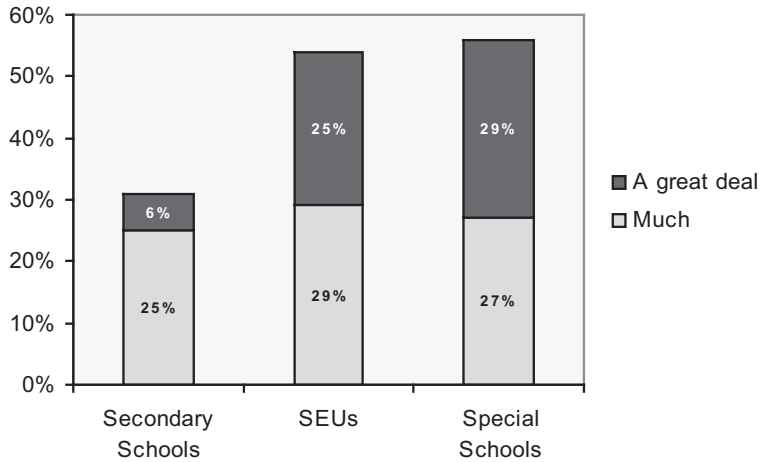


FIGURE 2

A comparison of preparation for community ratings (much to a great deal) across school types.

living, and the extent to which schools imparted information about postschool service providers. Parents responded to these questions on a 5-point Likert scale across a range of responses from *None*, *A little*, *Somewhat*, *Much*, *A great deal*.

Parent reporting ($n = 196$) about how well the school had prepared their young adult for employment was evenly distributed across response options from not at all to a great deal, with 37% giving a rating of not at all to a little and 36% much to a great deal. Figure 1 provides a comparison of employment preparation ratings for much to a great deal across school types (state secondary and nongovernment schools, SEUs, and special schools).

The 65 comments made were balanced across positive and negative views. Positive comments expressed satisfaction with teachers and school programs. For example, ‘They helped her to get on with people’ and ‘Considering limited resources the teachers did an outstanding job. Very caring’. Negative comments indicated dissatisfaction with staff (teachers, school transition officers) and programs provided. For example, ‘Most of his teachers didn’t even know he had Aspergers syndrome’ and ‘Transition Officer offered brochures but nothing substantial’. Twenty-seven comments expressed the view that severity of disability precluded employment after leaving school. For example, ‘Employment was never an achievable goal due to severity of disability’.

By comparison, parent reporting ($n = 211$) about the preparation for community activities were skewed to a more positive view, with 24% giving a rating of not at all to a little and 54% much to a great deal. Figure 2 provides a comparison of community activity preparation ratings for much to a great deal across school types (state secondary and non-government schools, SEUs, and special schools).

Of the 44 comments made, some positive comments included ‘Combined effort with family support’, ‘Got him used to being in the community’, and ‘Many school activities conducted to familiarise the person with the community’.

A similar pattern of positive responses was reported for daily living preparation. Fifty-one per cent of these parents ($n = 108$) gave ratings of much to a great deal, while

23% gave ratings of not at all to a little. Figure 3 provides a comparison of daily living preparation ratings for much to a great deal across school types (state secondary and non-government schools, SEUs, and special schools).

Forty-four parents commented on the extent to which the school program prepared their young adult with skills for daily living. Positive comments indicated that ‘The school worked very hard on this’, ‘He was self-sufficient on leaving school’, and ‘Combined effort with family support’. A number of comments indicated that the home played the greater part in the teaching of skills for daily living. For example, ‘Could do these skills by self. Taught by mother’.

The majority of parents (91%, $n = 192$) indicated that they received some level of information from the school about available postschool options. The descriptor ‘helpful’ was often embedded in comments. A few parents highlighted the important role that the school transition officer played in this provision of information. Additionally, a few parents signalled that information was not user friendly and was provided too late in the transition process, which resulted in information overload.

A majority of parents reported high levels (much to a great deal) of family involvement (69%, $n = 149$) and teacher involvement (66%, $n = 143$) in goal-setting for post school life. A substantial number of parents (42%, $n = 86$) also reported low levels (not at all to a little) of student involvement in this activity

Thirty-seven per cent of parents ($n = 72$) felt that current work and community activities undertaken by their young adults were consistent with the goals set during final years of schooling (much to a great deal) compared to 34% ($N = 66$) who reported low levels of consistency (not at all to a little).

The young adult’s satisfaction with life (currently and in the final year of schooling) and the extent to which families made adjustments after school completion were reported from the parent’s perspective.

Life satisfaction for the young adults during the final year of schooling was reported as much to a great deal by 55% of parents ($n = 113$), while 16% rated life satisfaction as

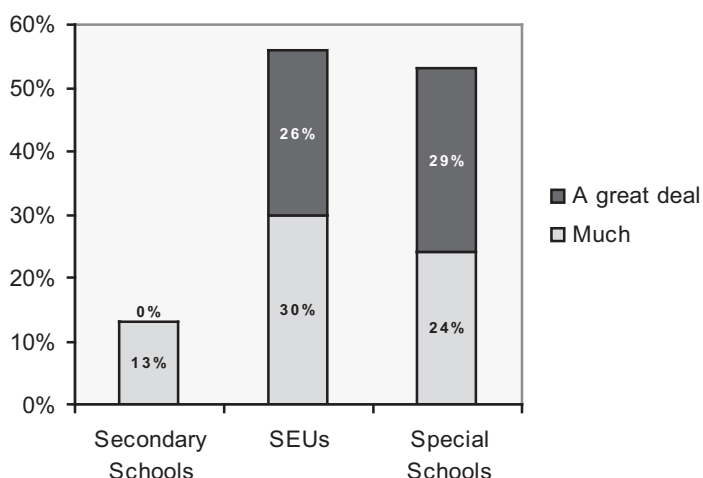


FIGURE 3

A comparison of preparation for daily living ratings (much to a great deal) across school types.

Not at all to A little. A comparison of ratings for much to a great deal across school types indicates little difference (state secondary and nongovernment schools with 56%, SEUs with 48%, and special schools with 58%). Fifty-seven parents made a specific comment on this satisfaction level. In the main, positive comments focused on aspects of socialisation with teachers and friends and described young adults as being ‘happy’ and ‘comfortable’ at school. Negative aspects drew attention to boredom with school activities and the inappropriateness of the school program to meet individual student need. For these young adults, some had ‘had enough’, were ‘ready for something different’, and were ‘keen to leave school’.

Current life satisfaction for the young adults was similarly reported, with 64% of parents ($n = 132$) rating life satisfaction as much to a great deal. Satisfaction ratings did not differ according to type of school attended. Positive comments alluded to the young adult as: ‘Appears to be happy and confident with things at the moment’, ‘He is enjoying his new life very much’, and “Getting better’. Only 13% of parents indicated that their young adult was not currently satisfied with life (not at all to a little). Negative comments included ‘I feel he is going backwards and becomes very lonely. Has no friends. Post school grant does not give many hours’, ‘Bored as he is not in a program daily as he needs a lot of structure’, and ‘My son does not get very much stimulation, he spends much of his time with older people, it’s very sad really’.

Finally, parents were asked to comment on the extent to which they had to make adjustments to their everyday lives after their son or daughter left school. Almost 50% of parents ($n = 102$) reported that considerable family adjustment (much to a great deal) was required when their young adult left school. Parents with young adults who had attended special schools (55%) reported higher adjustments compared to those whose young adults attended SEUs (34%) and state secondary and non-government schools (31%). A third of parents made some comment about this issue. Three key family adjustments were identified: work, transport, and home.

First, parental reduction and/or cessation of work (particularly mothers) were reported most frequently. As an example, one parent stated ‘The family became emotionally dysfunctional and were unable to cope. Mother resigned from \$60,000 per/year job (and RESENTS it) to assist’. Second, transport and access were also raised as common issues. An illustration of the impact on families was ‘Because we resided about 54 kms west of (regional city) there was no transport to bring her into Endeavour. We tried bringing her in each day 1,000 kms/week, but we found this was too expensive and wearing, so we moved into (regional city)’. Third, the degree of disruption to family life also was repeatedly highlighted by parents. For example, one parent described these demands as ‘Organisations dictate the hours of care, 10–2 pm. Anything I need to do must be accomplished in 4 hours’. Another parent provided a stark summary of her situation: ‘My whole life is an adjustment’.

Summative Comments

Summative Comments on School Activities

Thirty-five per cent of parents ($n = 77$) made concluding comments about school preparation. In the main, general comments on school activities and specific comments on goal setting were provided.

A majority of parents commented positively on the general nature of school activities and on relationships with school staff. Typical comments included ‘The SEU was a safe positive environment for my daughter, it promoted self esteem essential for

post school transition’, and ‘Special school was very supportive. I feel let down by disability organisations who are supposed to help’. However, a few critical comments were made. For example, ‘There are no community activities. He attended to Year 12, I felt he was being babysat/filling in time at school. He did do basic life skills that were repeated at TAFE post school’.

By comparison, parents who commented about goal setting frequently provided a more negative perspective. For example, ‘Very little goals were set at school due to the lack of knowledge of the disability sector by the senior teaching staff’, ‘As parents were involved in writing IEPs with teachers. These documents were never fully implemented, were not rigorously goal directed’, ‘I was disappointed in the last three years of school, his IEP needs were not being addressed’, and ‘School is irrelevant to life they cannot possible prepare a person for the real thing. Washing three tea-towels or shopping for biscuits just isn’t what it is like’.

Additional Comments

Thirty-five per cent of parents ($n = 76$) made final comment to issues raised by the questionnaire. Concerns over a lack of government funding to provide postschool activities was a central theme as illustrated by this comment:

Postschool funding is not enough to prepare persons with an Intellectual disability for independent living. The dollars drop each year with support staff wage increases and this gets families more frustrated especially if their son/daughter wants to live independently. A review of funding is long overdue and they should cover wage increases yearly, not have hours cut. Carers are getting overburdened more each year and the Govt. does not care. Elderly carers are being ignored, many have no funding ...

Others tied a lack of funding to limited postschool options as illustrated by this comment:

The options available will remain second rate until sufficient funding is allowed to train and employ full-time staff such as in the education system. No one stays in a job that is poorly paid and lacks any permanency. I know of no families who are comfortable with the postschool life of their child. No proper trained staff or suitable venues make a farce of the program and funding. No amount of funding package, regardless of how large it may be can be successful if there are not appropriate services to purchase.

At an overall level, frustration with transition outcomes was often articulated. Examples include:

I’d just like to add the last year of my son’s schooling and transitional period were the most difficult and confusing and emotional times we have had. When a child with special needs finishes school, it is like falling off a cliff for the carer and the child. A huge void, living in a rural area makes it ten times harder.

Future recommendations were made by a number of parents. The most frequent recommendation pertained to the need for ongoing educational experiences illustrated by this comment:

People with intellectual impairment would benefit enormously through extended schooling. My son and many others are just beginning to respond well to the education process at secondary level. My son is at the brighter end of II and repeating the same TAFE classes for the past 3 years since school and is not achieving any further improvement in his knowledge or abilities. He is stagnating and I can see him spending his life as a blimp in front of the computer or TV, from this point on there are very, very few employment opportunities these days for our special young adults. Very, very distressing!! We parents with similar children all feel that school duration should be greatly extended beyond 17 or 18 years of age.

Some Thoughts for the Future

The Queensland Quality Outcomes study, a part of which I have referred to today, made several recommendations to the Minister for Education and I would like to conclude by citing some of the implications for transition education from the key findings from the study. All of the recommendations are similar to those drawn from other studies in the Australian and international literature. As mentioned earlier, these series of studies were organised around Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Education and we used this framework to report our recommendations to the Queensland Government. I would like to comment on them today in the order that I feel is indicative of their importance to the improvement of outcomes for students with an intellectual disability in Australia.

Interagency Collaboration

Although many teachers who participated in the Queensland study were proactive in building relationships with postschool service providers, they often experienced difficulty in maintaining strong interagency networks. A major cause of this difficulty was the often-experienced problem of being unable to access postschool agencies for work experience while the students were still enrolled at school. Different arrangements used by state and Commonwealth departments to fund these services were at the root of this problem. Examples from the United States describing how interdepartmental collaboration and funding arrangements enable students' access to postschool service programs while they are still at school make the transition to postschool services more seamless could be explored in Australia (see Timmons, 2007, and Noonan, Morningsar & Erickson, 2008, for examples of how this can be achieved).

Further, community transition teams consisting of school, postschool service provider, parent, and local business representatives can work together to create conditions for improving transition outcomes (see Stodden, Brown, Galloway, Mrazek, & Noy, 2005, for advice on how these teams can be established). Finally, the use of dedicated transition specialists to initiate and maintain school/postschool agency links was a high priority finding in many studies.

Program Structure

Data from the focus groups in the Queensland Quality Outcomes Study and the teacher survey indicated that support for transition education in the form of clearly articulated philosophies, policies and procedures were required at both systemic and local levels. In the teacher questionnaire section of the Queensland study transition teachers reported a lack of professional development opportunities and identified the need for this as having a high priority. To this end, Education Queensland commissioned the preparation of six professional development Modules based on Kohler's taxonomy for transition education and these are to be used as a basis for professional development for transition teachers.

A final recommendation focused on the evaluation of programs of transition education with reference to student outcomes. Data from the teacher survey and teacher focus groups indicated that many transition programs did not know what happened to their students after they exited the school system. An exception to this were schools associated with the South Coast Transition Model reported earlier where the achievement of goals set during the period of transition are monitored for periods up to three years

after leaving school. If schools are unaware of the outcomes achieved by their students, it is difficult for them to gauge the effectiveness of their school transition processes.

Student-Focused Planning

Although the only Australian study that investigated the role of self-determination in transition planning found that all the programs investigated placed a strong emphasis on this (Laragy, 2004), a majority of parents in the Queensland study were of the view that their children were not actively involved in their transition planning. As student involvement in this planning is highly associated with the meeting of these goals postschool, more consideration needs to be given to the implementation of strategies that teach students to advocate on their own behalf during the transition planning process. This should include the teaching of these skills from an early age and the use of adaptations that will assist students to participate in this process.

Student Development

Begin the development of the community-based skills that students will require when they leave school early in the secondary school career. It should be remembered that a majority of the studies investigating the factors that lead to positive postschool outcomes were conducted in the United States where students with a disability frequently remain in the school system until 21 to 22 years of age and in settings that are community rather than school-based. This, combined with evidence for cognitive growth in persons with an intellectual impairment during late adolescence and early adulthood means that the students included in these American studies may have benefited greatly from their extended school program and that this led to improved postschool outcomes. In the Queensland study a majority of transition teachers indicated that the transition education process should begin at age 14.

All students, regardless of degree of disability, should be afforded the opportunity to participate in significant amounts of work experience. As indicated in many of the Australian studies reviewed earlier, these experiences should be supervised and structured to meet the specific needs of individuals.

Parent Involvement

A majority of parents who participated in the Queensland study indicated that they had been involved with the setting of goals for their children's transition activities. A frequent comment from families was that the involvement of families in the transition process should begin early in the students' senior schooling, as leaving this to the final year of school often results in information overload for parents. In addition many parents were of the view that information on postschool options should be user friendly and should accurately reflect what is available in the community.

Conclusion

Many of the key recommendations from the Queensland study are similar to those made from other investigations into postschool outcomes both in Australia and overseas. Further, the recommendations have been made over an extended period of time (e.g., the NSW transition initiative that began in the late 1980s). We all know that the quality of life in the areas of employment, community contact and social interaction after leaving school for many persons with Autism and/or an intellectual disability leaves

much to be desired. Further, the qualitative and quantitative data presented today indicates that many families make significant adjustments to their lifestyle in order to care for their sons and daughters when they leave school. Perhaps it is time to re-examine the recommendations of the past and devise a plan to implement them. Because many of the recommendations involve systemic support and change, I know that many of you will proffer the view that it is very difficult for teachers at the front line of the transition effort to initiate changes of this nature. Teachers tend to shy away from situations over which they feel they have little or no control. However, a detailed knowledge of the processes associated with improved postschool outcomes for our students should be used to present the evidence to those with influence at a systemic level. Detailed submissions for resources using evidence-based arguments are difficult to refute even in times of scarce resources. Special educators must join with postschool providers and other arms of government to improve the adult lives of our past students. We can and must do better.

Acknowledgment

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