



August 23, 2013

Dear Dr. Zais:

Attached you will find the official recommendations from the Professional Development and Transition committees of the South Carolina Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities (Advisory Council). The Advisory Council recognizes the clear need to prepare the next generation of special educators and administrators in the area of Secondary Transition. South Carolina is one of only 7 states in the country, and the only state in the southeastern region, that does not have a Secondary Transition-relevant credential in place. A secondary transition endorsement will build the capacity to maximize services to South Carolina youth transitioning to adult life.

We hope you will find our recommendations to the State Department of Education helpful. We look forward to improving the outcomes of students with disabilities in South Carolina, and we feel that this endorsement is an important step towards that goal. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah Pope".

Sarah Pope
Chair
South Carolina Advisory Council
on the Education of Students with Disabilities

Proposal: Task Force to develop criteria for Secondary Transition Specialist

The SC Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities recognizes a clear need to prepare the next generation of special educators and administrators in the area of secondary transition. Individuals prepared with this area of expertise will teach students and lead efforts to develop effective programs, including college and career readiness curricula, for middle and high school students resulting in improved student graduation rates and adult outcomes. Specifically, we recommend:

- 1) support for an endorsement in secondary transition
- 2) that the Office of Exceptional Children create a task force charged with identifying recommended coursework, practical experience, and content delivery options for the endorsement in secondary transition. This task force should include a representative from each of the following areas: higher education faculty, higher education/disabilities services, Vocational Rehabilitation, Center for Independent Living; Special Education and school administrators, individuals with disabilities, Businesses with history of hiring individuals with disabilities (e.g. Walgreens), parents of students with disabilities, transition coordinators, disability rights organizations.

Secondary transition refers to planning for students to move from school to adult life. A secondary transition specialist would focus on preparing students for all postsecondary outcomes (e.g., college attendance, employment, independent living) and would design programs and provide adequate preparation for all students, with an emphasis on students with disabilities and students at risk for dropping out of school. Transition services are defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education regulations (IDEA: 34 CFR § 300.43), and appropriate services in the form of IEP goals and transition services are required in Indicator 13 in the State Performance Plan. This endorsement will address a critical need in this state – improving the outcomes of students receiving special education or students struggling through typical college preparatory curricula. Specialized coursework will address areas of employment, interagency collaboration, independent living skills, and postsecondary educational programming.

Need

Currently, many personnel preparation programs available to special educators in South Carolina suffer from the same lack of comprehensive training on transition that has been documented in other states (Benitez, Morningstar, & Frey, 2009; Morningstar & Kleinhammer-Tramil, 2005). A recent survey of transition practices of South Carolina special educators found great inconsistencies in the amount of training received by transition personnel, specifically special educators who are the main providers of transition planning and services. Most noteworthy were responses indicating that those responsible for operating transition programs had little experience with evidence-based practices (Plotner & Mazzotti, 2013). South Carolina is one of only 7 states in the country, and the only state in the southeastern region, that does NOT have transition-relevant credential structures or content requirements. Although several colleges and universities in South Carolina provide pre-service undergraduate and graduate personnel preparation in special education there is only one transition focused degree (a temporary, federally-funded opportunity at the University of South Carolina) available in the state. Currently, individuals designated as transition specialists meet minimal state certification requirements, often they have very limited experience and inadequate training directly related to the significant needs of transition-age youth with disabilities and their families (e.g., brief part- or one-day workshops, single, annual, didactic and de-contextualized conference presentations). Despite the rising need for transition service delivery, critical shortages in adequately prepared personnel continue to be troublesome at the local, state, and national levels (Anderson et al., 2003).

The post-school outcomes of students with disabilities compared to their peers without disabilities continues to be unacceptable, despite 25 years of laws, policies, and funding dedicated to preparing students with disabilities for adult life (Kessler Foundation/ National Organization on Disability [NOD], 2010). Nationally, 21% of working-age people *with* disabilities say they are working full or part-time compared to 59% of working-age people *without* disabilities. Four years after leaving school, only 52% of youth with disabilities are working, and their jobs are short in duration, averaging 13 months and averaging wages of only \$9.00 an hour (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2007). Given these poor outcomes, it is not surprising that people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as those without disabilities (34% vs 15%) and a majority who work report that they struggle to get by, or live paycheck to paycheck (NOD, 2010).

According to the *Twenty-fifth Annual Report to Congress*, South Carolina data indicated that the percentage of students ages 14-21 served under IDEA, Part B, exiting school by dropping out was 48%, well above the national average (United States Department of Education, 2010). With the advent of federal mandates to serve transition-age youth with disabilities in South Carolina, highly qualified teacher shortages have been and continue to be a severe personnel problem for administrators in Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Outcome data specific to the state of SC reveals that in 2011, the employment rate for individuals with a disability, age 16 – 20, in South Carolina was 9.1%, compared to national rate of 19.1%. This is the second lowest rate in the nation (only Puerto Rico was lower, at 6.4%) (American Community Survey, 2012). We do not, however, have access to additional information that informs us how well we are preparing students at risk or students with disabilities for life after school (e.g., independent living status, incarceration rates). One role of transition specialists would be to work with districts and the state department to collect and analyze such data and use it to improve existing programs.

Capacity

A secondary transition endorsement in South Carolina could address this need by ensuring professionals are equipped to maximize services to youth transitioning to adult life. Preparing qualified transition personnel is recognized in the research as one of the critical factors for improving outcomes of students with disabilities (Benitez, et al., 2009). South Carolina needs both quality pre-service and in-service options that prepare future and current educators as Secondary Transition Specialists. Ensuring that special education teachers are prepared to support students with disabilities and their families as they enter adult life is critical. Enacting a state-wide endorsement on secondary transition services will speak volumes about how we as a society view youth with disabilities, our belief in students' potential for success, and willingness to invest in their future..

Currently, South Carolina has the interest, personnel, and mechanisms for creating and providing training for Secondary Transition Specialists. Special education directors throughout the state enthusiastically support the need for training and an endorsement in this area. New university faculty with specific expertise in secondary transition and the South Carolina State Transition Capacity Building Team have worked together during the past two years to identify training needs in the area of transition throughout the state and to focus the development of a collaborative, interagency network that could help provide training opportunities. The current state improvement grant (Project Gateway) includes a transition emphasis and could serve as a foundation for state-wide service delivery. It is clear that the state of South Carolina is ready and able to provide much needed training in an area critical to the successful outcomes of so many of its citizens.

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