Proposal and Background

The policy being examined is the state of Arkansas’s transition guidelines for the process of guiding students age 16 or older in the formation of a transition plan in the IEP. The transition plan should result in the achievement of specified goals to address the following areas: instruction, related areas, community experiences, the development of employment or other post-school living needs, and if applicable the development of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. These areas are shaped through consideration of a student’s strengths, preferences and interests (Arkansas Department of Education Special Education and Related Services, Sec. 21.03.1.2, July 2008).

The state policy in many ways reflects the language of IDEA 2004 in that it is describes a coordinated set of activities that is “to be a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; and is based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests . . . " (IDEA 2004, Section 1401 (34)). The state law further explores specific activities that are included such as instruction, related services, employment and daily living skills.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) has four criteria to consider academic and non-academic benefit to the student, negative effects on student, other students and staff, and cost of LRE (Turnbull et al, 2007). Transition relates to LRE because it considers how the student will continue their education or training beyond high school, career and/or job development, and independent living skills if applicable. Taylor (2004) points out that LRE exists beyond school walls in various physical spaces that individuals may interact with such as residential facilities, homes, group homes, and community agencies. Once the student leaves the school setting the goal is for students to participate in their community in the least restrictive environment possible. The best practice would be to create a transition plan and opportunities for students to fully participate in their school and home communities to develop skills in the transition domains to ensure that they are not restricted in opportunities in their post-secondary lives.

The five aspects of a free and appropriate education are: IDEA’s process and outcomes of an appropriate education, the different types of individualized plans for implementing an appropriate education, special education services and related services necessary for FAPE, evidence of an appropriate education, and government functions related to students with disabilities and their rights to a free and appropriate public education (Turnbull et al., 2007). The transition plan and success is dependent on IDEA’S process and outcomes can be measured through Indicator 14 data to determine its success. Secondly, the transition plan ensures a continuation of special education services and related services as needed by planning how the individual will access these services upon graduation to achieve their post-secondary goals.

Data Collection

An informational interview was conducted with Courtney Eubanks, the licensed special education administrator for Lakeside School District. The interview questions were as follows:

* + Do we have an indicator 14 report specific to the district?
  + Who supports transition planning?
  + What supports and programs are established to support student success in transition planning and facilitate success in post-school outcomes?
  + What community agencies are being utilized to achieve post-secondary outcome success?
  + What age does transition planning begin in our district?

A data analysis was also completed using indicator 14 data from 2016-17, the most recent indicator 14 data available from the Arkansas Department of Education’s website. The results are shared in a table on this page and continues on the following page.

Indicator 14 Findings

Information gathered was a district level Indicator 14 report. Indicator 14 data reflects youth who received special education services prior to high school graduation and measures their success in post-secondary outcomes in three areas: enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school, enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school, or enrolled in higher education or some other post-secondary education program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school. This information is collected annually and is dependent on participant responses. Information that is most recent and available is from 2016-17.

There are possible causes of variance in percentages. First, Indicator 14 data is dependent on participant responses. The number of responses collected for the district is unknown which could be accounting for drastic differences in percentages between LEA and state numbers. Secondly, it is possible that there was an error in data entry. When data was reviewed, we noticed the percentage for the LEA under part A and B was the same percentage. Regardless of the cause of variances within the data, it is important to note the state percentage and to analyze how we can better meet the needs of students through strong transition planning and supports once they enter post-secondary environments.

*Indicator 14 Data: SY 2016-17*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Indicator** | **State Rate** | **State Target** | **LEA Rate** | **LEA difference from Target** |
| A. enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school | 20% | 14.82% | 15.79% | N/A |
| B. enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school | 48.78% | 50.51% | 15.79% | -34.72% |
| C. enrolled in higher education or some other post-secondary education program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school | 65.85% | 61.70% | 36.84% | -24.68% |

Transition Planning Process

Although the state does not require schools to begin transition planning until students reach the age of sixteen, the school district recognizes the importance of transition planning and encourages case managers and students/families to begin this process in middle school. Each student has a case manager who is typically the special education file holder. The school counselors are also involved in transition planning meetings and can be helpful in linking students and families to community agencies, school programs and services to support transition planning. There are a variety of resources available to students to support transition domains and facilitate a seamless transition from high school to post-secondary opportunities. The resources available offer a range of services for individuals with moderate to severe disabilities. The high school also has a transition assessment library that is utilized to support students in identifying post-secondary goals. The school has several community partnerships for career and job development. It also has a unique partnership with the local community college, National Park Community College, which allows students to earn 60 credits for free while in high school which equates to an associate’s degree. Having these supports and resources supports students develop important post-secondary skills and allows them to achieve post-secondary goals while they are still in high school. A list of resources and how they are related to transition domains are described on the table on the following page.

*Current School Based Partnerships*

*SY 2018-19*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Community Agency** | **Higher Education** | **Employment/Career Training** | **Independent Living (housing, transportation, financial supports etc.)** | **Related Services (nursing, personal aid, transportation, etc.)** |
| AR Rehabilitation Services |  | x | x | X |
| Arkansas Career Training Institute |  | X | X |  |
| O.W.L. (Opportunities for Work Based Learning)\* |  | X |  |  |
| R.A.M.S. program\* |  | X |  |  |
| Abilities Unlimited |  | X | X | X |
| First Step |  | x | x | X |
| National Park Community College\* | X | X |  |  |
| CHI St. Vincent Project SEARCH\* |  | x |  |  |

\*School based partnerships

Critiques

There was one identified critique of the transition planning policy in place which was attributed to an external factor of parents’ willingness to allow their child to participate in opportunities to develop work and job skills, community recreation and social opportunities and opportunities to explore independent living. An additional critique of the policy and its implementation is the availability of data from the previous year to be accessed in a reasonable amount of time to allow schools to review gaps in transition programming and make a plan to address these gaps.

Recommendations

* Provide workshops for parents to better understand transition process that include information about age of majority, guardianship and alternatives, and how outcomes are measured and the importance of their role in providing information.
* Connect students and parents with examples of students who have achieved success in post-school outcomes and highlight successes and struggles.
* Encourage parent participation in the transition planning process to utilize support networks that could lead to job opportunities for students.
* Set district level expectation for district transition planning with agreed upon process for the district regarding transition planning that is broken up by age with benchmarks for each age that focuses on building the student’s capacity to realize their goals each year including when transition planning will begin at the district.
* Use Indicator 14 data to identify strengths and deficits on transition planning and programming and work together to find solutions to address areas of growth. If possible, save the data submitted for the current school year to be reviewed by special education administrators and staff involved in transition planning to identify strengths and deficits noted above.

Conclusion

Transition planning is a required component of IDEA 2004 and is required to begin when a student turns sixteen. While some stated choose to start transition planning at age fourteen, Arkansas does not require students to begin this process until age sixteen. Although it is required to start by age 16, local education agencies may begin transition planning when they feel it is appropriate. There are two accountability measures to ensure transition planning has measurable goals to facilitate post-school outcomes (indicator 13) and to measure post school outcomes upon graduation (indicator 14) as facilitated by transition planning. Parent participation and student participation when appropriate is also required by IDEA 2004 to ensure that the plan is individualized and supports the student in major transition domains: education or training, employment, and independent living, when applicable. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in conjunction with IDEA encourages parent participation as well as accountability to supporting students in preparation for their lives after graduation.

While the letter of the law dictates when transition planning must take place, what is included and who should be included, the spirit of the law allows students to achieve their dreams and for transition teams to work together to help students realize and achieve their dreams. There are many possibilities to increase transition opportunities for students and to increase outcomes for students with disabilities but it starts with developing the skills, learning about preferences and interests and hearing what students want their lives to look like beyond high school.

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