

## Chapter Eleven

# Framework for Positive Outcomes



# Framework for Positive Outcomes: Designing School-to-Work Programs for DeafBlind Teens

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“High expectations are the key to everything.” – Sam Walton

## Introduction

As with any new construction, establishing a solid foundation is imperative. Without a proven blueprint, construction can get off track and go way over budget. Both a great deal of forethought and preparation are essential to identify potential environmental changes that may cause difficulties for new projects. Much like the consideration given to new structures, a successful transition experience for high school students who are deafblind requires a lot of forethought, skilled training, and early preparation. Without such training, it is unlikely that deafblind students leaving high school and moving on to the world of work and adult services will be able to withstand unforeseen adversity or environmental risks associated with adulthood and living independently.

Recent proposed cuts to the vocational education program for high school students will have a tremendous impact on post-school outcomes for students with disabilities, and more specifically, students who are deafblind. Historically, this program has helped educators and families identify vocational and post-school goals which helped to determine preliminary transition plans for deafblind students. Because the average day for a high school student is jammed back-to-back with academic requirements, standardized tests, and community service requirements, there is often a need to take additional time to properly plan for the transition of deafblind students. It is critical to begin the process early enough to permit the student's transition team to fully maximize all the time to which the student is entitled under the law (Ingraham, 2001). Often, tutoring sessions, orientation and mobility lessons, and wading through the large volume of accessible materials can consume an entire day for a deafblind student.

Due to the need for additional academic preparation and the need to keep up with state and federal education standards, many high school students who are deafblind are frequently not afforded the same opportunities for peer interaction and incidental learning

as their hearing-sighted or deaf peers. Support services and classroom accommodations are not only provided to address basic accessibility issues, but are an essential component to a deafblind student's typical day. Care has to be taken to ensure that opportunities to develop life skills and self-awareness are consciously incorporated into the student's day.

The fact that deafblind students do not have the ability to actively view popular television programming or magazines that are age-specific, or to discuss the latest fashion trends, dating mores, and pressing societal issues can leave them light-years behind their peers when it comes to transition preparation. Socializing with peers and developing age-appropriate behaviors and expectations are as critical as career exploration, college placement tests, and meeting federal standards of learning requirements.

### **Transition Planning**

More than just planning for linkages to service providers and systems, the transition process for deafblind students requires a great deal of self-excavating and exploration on the part of the student. An undertaking of this significance cannot be taken on without proper support from an effective and informed team of concerned professionals, family members, friends, and mentors (Ingraham et al, 1994; Lankard, 2000). High school students who are deafblind are required to master these tools, along with academic subject areas required for graduation and independent living. Unfortunately, there are not enough hours in the average school day to enable a deafblind student to achieve every required goal. As a result, more parents, educators, and students are realizing the benefits of continuing education beyond the typical age of 17 or 18. Many are choosing to remain connected with the school system until the student's educational entitlement has been exhausted. In most states, students are entitled to a free and appropriate education until age 21, provided that targeted goals are agreed upon and written in the student's IEP. In addition to an extended high school experience, deafblind students are making creative use of summer vacations, after school hours, and other extended break periods to *catch up* with their hearing-sighted peers.

It has been observed that many deafblind high school students lack perspective and clarity about life skills and basic interpersonal relationships simply because they have not experienced these situations (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). While it is impossible to simulate all probable scenarios from which high school students who are deafblind can experience real life, effort should be made to expose students to as many natural experiences as feasible. Any exposure to typical peer and social experiences will help to equip the deafblind student with the fundamental framework and roadmap needed to make

a successful voyage from high school to life as an independent adult. Without such a roadmap, deafblind students are likely to become one of the statistics which state that students with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of school as their non disabled peers (Timmons, Mack, Sims, Hare, & Wills, 2006).

Parents, educators, peers, and mentors are great resources and should be invited to be members of the student's transition planning team. By watching and speaking with parents and mentors, the deafblind student is afforded the opportunity to obtain a glimpse of the adult world. It is vital that team members work together to help the deafblind student establish personal goals for the short-term as well as the long-term. Many deafblind students are not accustomed to thinking beyond their present situation and may find it too challenging at first to set long-term goals. Whether the level of the bar is set high by parents, teachers, or the student, it is important to set the bar high. It has been proven that students who are expected to do well in school and are afforded opportunities to do so are more likely to have successful post-school experiences than students who are not challenged at all (Ingraham, 2001).

### **Initial Assessments**

We know that many students who are deafblind may be uncertain of what types of jobs they would like to do in the future. For this reason, parent, teacher, and student interviews are a good place to begin the information-gathering process. Expectations in the classroom and home may not be aligned, and as a result, parents may observe different areas of interest and need than what is observed by the classroom instructor. Likewise, students may find one environment more conducive to self-exploration and creativity than another. Parents may be too rigid or overly protective, which may stifle creativity and natural curiosity. Conversely, some classroom instructors may place higher expectations on deafblind students than what they are able to manage. Thus, communication between the home and school is an essential component to the student's overall education program. Information gleaned from parent, teacher, and student interviews can also be used as part of the preliminary foundation for the student's assessment, until a more formalized tool is introduced.

While informal, this data may be the most reliable indicator of the student's interests and abilities, as there are no reliable norms for deafblind students using the existing standardized aptitude and ability tests (Vernon & Hammer, 1996). Formal standardized tests can yield very important information about the student's abilities, however, care should be taken when using the results of such testing to plan for a student's transition to

post-school life. If a test does not have established norms for deafblind students, it should not be used as the sole indicator of a student's true interest or aptitude.

### **Periodic Appraisals**

Once information has been gathered regarding the student's observed interests, skills, and experiences, more formal testing with actual work tasks can be introduced. Begin with simulated work tasks in the classroom environment, and gradually progress to environments outside the classroom. This can be an excellent way to find out how well the student can perform a particular task in settings that are unfamiliar and how well he or she performs under pressure.

Many paper and pencil interest assessments are challenging for deafblind students to complete. Information related to types of job duties and vocations are often best understood through exposure to the actual task. Some students who have very minimal residual vision and hearing may have never seen someone perform a specific job duty before; however, very useful information can be dispensed during student interviews and interest inventories. Contrastingly, because some students may not be aware of the types of jobs they will be able to perform given their vision and hearing loss, a paper and pencil assessment tool may require some modifications in order to provide definitions and clarification of duties or to highlight possible accommodations that would enable the student to perform the individual tasks that are vital for the position. Such tests should be revisited throughout the student's time in high school.

### **Non-School Related Resources**

As students are exposed to more work tasks and environments, new revelations regarding interests, skills, and readiness may be uncovered. Any activities that can not be accomplished during the regular school day should be offered during weekends, extended holiday breaks, or summer vacations. In such cases, the school district may be tapped as a funding source for on-the-job support services, transportation, orientation and mobility training, or any required adaptive technology. In very rare cases, the state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency may be willing to use school assessment resources to bring together information about the employment potential of prospective VR consumers. It is prudent to ask if the student is eligible to receive some degree of support from the vocational rehabilitation agency to support career exploration or vocation training activities while they are still connected with the school system (Ingraham et al, 1994; Ingraham & Anderson, 2001).

Early contact with the vocational rehabilitation state agency can be seen as a cost-saving measure for the vocational rehabilitation counselor who would like to get started earlier than what is required by law on what may be viewed as a potentially challenging case. If all parties are in agreement and work collaboratively, the use of expertise from the school system, community resources, and key personnel to identify potential vocational goals for deafblind students can help the VR counselor shorten the time a deafblind consumer's file remains open with the state agency (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). In addition to an emphasis on vocational skills, deafblind students may require extensive training to access public transportation, use orientation and mobility skills, acquire independent living skills, and to develop self-advocacy. Community mentorship and recreation programs for youth with disabilities, church and extra-curricular activities at school are great outlets to help deafblind students learn from peers, gain exposure to role models, and assume leadership positions. The more self-awareness students possess, the more capable they will be when it is time to speak up for themselves and to function as their own advocate.

### **Participating in IEP Meetings**

By law, students who are deafblind are expected to be active members of their Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and, whenever possible, should be consulted before any education-related goals are established. This participation will provide the student with a clear understanding of his or her individual support needs, what adaptive technology is required for accessibility, the role that support staff plays in their lives, and how to set and achieve short-term and long-term goals. Exposure to self-determining moments such as these will provide students with an excellent foundation to better understand the level of control they are expected to have in their own lives. This includes identifying personal and work-related interests, talents, and goals that will be incorporated into their IEPs. *Appendix A* highlights target areas which should be addressed when preparing deafblind students to transition from high school to adult life. Whether students remain in school until age 21 or leave at the age of 18, these goals are key milestones that, if left unmet, could potentially have an adverse effect on how successful the transition process will be.

### **Job Development**

While the classroom instructor, parent, and student are determining the interests, skills, and goals for employment exposure, the job developer begins to canvas the student's

home community. The objective of this search is to locate potential business partners whose services fall into identified target areas that match the student's interests and skills. Historically, many franchise stores and restaurants have been good business partners for school-to-work programs. Less success has been found in stores that are "Mom and Pop" establishments where family members are typically given preference in hiring. Sites that require some travel via public transportation are welcomed, as these locations allow deafblind students to learn about the practical aspects of planning a work day, including preparing for subway or bus delays and effectively communicating with the public to request directions or other information to ensure a timely arrival to the work site. Before work sites are selected, mobility specialists should investigate transportation during times of the day when the student will typically travel. Some students should also be given the opportunity to apply for para-transportation services and any other discount programs available to travelers with disabilities.

When the job developer and deafblind student agree upon a possible employment placement, an interview should be scheduled. Mock interviews can help the deafblind student prepare for the formal interview process and receive valuable feedback from school staff. Partnering employers can be enlisted to share questions which they would typically ask of prospective employees. Specific work tasks, schedules, rules, and responsibilities are usual topics covered during an initial interview.

### **On the Job**

Once the job is secure, the job coach, mobility specialist, and rehabilitation teacher may accompany each student to the employment site. Any accommodations relative to communication accessibility can be established during the initial visits. Some typical reasonable accommodation for this population can include:

- Communication books to initiate common daily work-related tasks (i.e., key words representing specific duties: empty trash, clean tables, mops floor, etc.).
- Magnification equipment for reading product labels.
- TTYs for use when calling in sick or placing calls from the work site.
- Alternative communication methods (i.e., dry-erase board and markers to communicate with customers, Screen Braille Communicator, photos, etc.).
- Identification buttons, which read "I AM DEAF AND BLIND." Store badges can also be modified with phrases like "Hello, I speak American Sign Language."

## **Examples of Success**

Some school districts operate formal school-to-work programming as a component of transition services offered to high school students. Other programs begin as early as six years of age, with teacher observations, instructor and family interviews, and exposure to work tasks in the classroom and community. It is never too early to begin the process; however, too much emphasis on vocational outcomes can stunt the academic potential of students. As with all students, a reasonable blend of vocational tasks and academic programming should be afforded to each deafblind student before he or she exits the school system. Below are examples of four programs that have provided deafblind high school students with sound foundations for successful school-to-work transition.

### *Washington, DC*

The Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) in Washington, DC has a transition model that begins when students arrive on campus. The transition counselor works with the deafblind student by gathering as much data about the student from parental anecdotes, formal evaluations (vocational, psychological, medical, etc.), and educational reports. This data-gathering process facilitates the writing of an initial Transition Plan that will be included in the student's IEP. This plan becomes a template for the work that the student and the Transition Counselor need to accomplish together. Because MSSD is a residential program, residence education staff members are also involved in the preparation.

Each student enrolled at MSSD is expected to participate in the internship program which provides hands-on vocational experience. The deafblind student is just like any other student who is expected to fulfill and learn from this requirement. Through this work experience, students are taught the importance of showing up to work on time, dressing appropriately, requesting reasonable accommodations, following instructions, asking for assistance, and communicating with non-signing co-workers, among other things.

MSSD is a unique residential program because it serves all 50 states and the U.S. Territories. Students from all over the country receive specialized instruction from a crew of competent teachers and staff whose goal it is to assure that each student exits this secondary program with experience, skills, and an understanding of themselves. This prepares the student for successful post-secondary experiences either in institutions of higher learning or employment settings. Because MSSD offers a residential component, instructional goals can be carried over and addressed after school hours by staff that possess the communication skills, cultural sensitivity, and access to resources needed by deaf and deafblind students. In addition to helping students learn work skills, apply their

literacy skills, and become independent travelers, staff provide students with instruction in appropriate daily living and self-advocacy skills.

At MSSD, the Transition Counselor facilitates a smoother transition of students from school to a post-secondary goal by connecting them with services that will help them realize their goals. Examples of these services include Vocational Rehabilitation, independent living skills programs, and other community resources that have been identified as possible service providers. This is where self-advocacy as a skill is beneficial. Without this connection, it is easy for students to get lost in a multitude of possibilities which never become realities. This transition approach provides the deaf and deafblind students with an understanding of the adult service system and how to access services with the supervision and guidance of the Transition Counselor who can help in times of confusion and provide redirection as needed.

### *Delaware*

The School-to-Work Program at the Delaware School for the Deaf provides academic and functional instruction in the areas of independent living, domestic chores, recreation and leisure activities, and community and vocational training. This program meets the needs of students who have diverse strengths, needs, and learning styles. Participants all have some level of hearing loss and may have additional cognitive or physical challenges. Through focused training relevant to critical life skills, students maximize instructional time from the ages of 14 through 21. The goal for each student is to exit school with skills and supports that will allow him/her to work, live in, and contribute to the local community.

Officially, vocational training begins at age 14. Until the age of 17, students participate in a job-sampling program. They receive training relevant to interviewing, attendance, punctuality, and interacting with co-workers. During these years, students are exposed to real work in non-profit community and school district vocational training programs. Staff determines job preferences and performance levels, as well as supports needed to participate in the work force. Students with mild disabilities are encouraged to acquire independent work skills, targeting accuracy, efficiency, duration and other work-related behaviors. Students with significant disabilities often are paired with other students who have complementary skills. These students are supported by a job coach to ensure quality and quantity control.

Unlike many other states that have federally funded DeafBlind Projects for Children, the state of Delaware has a DeafBlind Children's Program that is a part of the State Department of Education. This unique program affords students who are deafblind in the

state with access to specially trained professionals who are available to provide technical assistance to local School Districts, guidance for parents, summer training programs for students in special areas of interest, follow-along services for IEP meetings, and work experience programs. The DeafBlind Coordinator and staff members in the state of Delaware are responsible for organizing all the transition services for the state's more than 50 deafblind students. The DeafBlind Program staff also ensures that all necessary connections are made with appropriate adult service providers on behalf of each student. Every student, his or her parents, and other family members, as needed, are encouraged to actively participate in IEP and other team meetings when decisions on academic and vocational instruction are made.

A functional vocational assessment is provided, which enables the student to identify areas of interest and skill, and possible ambitions. Specialized equipment needs are more quickly addressed when coordinated by a professional who is knowledgeable and resourceful. Promptly addressing areas of need can help to reduce the amount of time students spend without essential technological and adaptive aids that often result in severe educational lags from which many students are often unable to recover. In the past, as a way to address the need for independent living skills training, the Delaware DeafBlind Program for Children coordinated a DeafBlind Transition Week during the summer. This week-long program addressed essential transition topics such as: employment literacy and interests, the role of an interpreter, the role of the vocational rehabilitation counselor, community resources, orientation and mobility, self-identification, resources for seeking support services, and alternative methods of communication. Students were given individualized instruction in their identified areas of interest.

When students reach approximately 18 years of age, the program focuses on competitive employment opportunities. On-the-job training and support are provided as deemed appropriate by employer and school personnel. Paid employment begins only after training and job performance are at an acceptable level. Some students, due to individual needs, will always require some degree of support on the job. This support may be provided and funded by state service agencies. The employer is responsible for paying only the employee, not the support personnel.

The Delaware School-to-Work Program is constantly seeking new job opportunities for students, and carefully matches employer needs with student strengths and preferences to ensure a dedicated and consistent worker and appropriate employment match.

### *Pennsylvania*

The Overbrook School for the Blind (OSB) operates a premiere educational program for deafblind students. Vocational assessments are begun as early as six years of age. Students are introduced to tasks which simulate actual work activities performed at local employment training sites utilized by the school. As the students progress through the program, they are given the opportunity to be exposed to a number of different employment scenarios. Required tasks at each new environment are assessed and cataloged for future use with other students. The staff at the OSB evaluates each student and determines which students would be best suited for the identified tasks. Some mentoring takes place as students with fewer skills are matched with students who possess greater skills in a particular area. Additionally, students are given the opportunity to receive a "promotion" into more challenging and rewarding tasks. Every student that graduates from OSB is equipped with a print résumé, and, in some cases, a video résumé which highlights his or her work history while in school. The employment documentation is the basis for the portfolio that students take with them into adult services. Because many deafblind students require personalized environmental and technological support, it is often better to use video footage to *show* adaptations in use rather than rely solely on written reports and recommendations.

### *New York*

For three years, from 2000 to 2002, the vocational rehabilitation training program at Helen Keller National Center's (HKNC) headquarters operated the Community Services Program (CSP) which was a collaboration and demonstration program in cooperation with the New York State Commission for the Blind (CBVH). The CSP provided direct rehabilitation, vocational, and support services to persons who were deafblind, at their homes, work sites, and communities.

Services were provided to eligible residents throughout New York State. Included in this program was a three-year project that enabled high school students who were deafblind to experience employment in their home communities with appropriate support. The work settings were diverse and reflected those identified by students as areas of interest:

- Flower store or botanical gardens assistant
- Blood bank assistant
- Drug store clerk
- Computer center technical aide
- Fast food restaurant worker

- Clothing store stock worker
- Video store clerk
- Book store clerk

All positions continued for a minimum of four weeks and a maximum of eight weeks; the program supported up to 24 hours per week of paid, competitive employment.

Following the selection of teenagers for the program, the first major step in the process was to contact the families to schedule information-sharing and planning meetings. The program philosophy was to incorporate family-centered planning, and would involve other persons from the community who would support the student. Because this program provided the first work experience for these children, both participants and family members expressed common concerns and anxieties. Some students were required to travel using public or para-transit for the first time. Parents were concerned about their child's safety outside the school setting, and the youths expressed fear of the novel and unknown.

After the initial year concluded, students and parents involved in the pilot program were invited to speak to the new group of students and parents. Meetings were held on weekends when all students and most parents were free to participate. Agencies connected with the program also scheduled staff to attend these meetings. Listening to the past successes and concerns of others helped to foster understanding and commitment to the process. The benefit of earning a salary was a frequent topic of discussion and appeared to be a primary motivator for teen participants.

In order to properly develop jobs for each adolescent and plan for a successful experience, numerous strategies were followed. Each participant was interviewed to determine his or her general interests, personal goals, academic and life skills, and the make-up of the neighborhood (i.e., retail outlets, businesses, and transportation options). Using this information, the job developer was able to establish a clear and precise follow-up plan. It was essential to agree on a time schedule for critical steps in the process, including: mock interview(s), a mobility assessment, and neighborhood visits. This established concrete expectations of both the program and the youths.

Work adjustment training was also implemented. The teens were exposed to concepts such as appropriate work behavior (e.g., being on time for shifts); communication strategies for the work site (such as using high and low technology options); responsibility, independence and interdependence; and appropriate behaviors for the work environment. It was important that communication on all of these issues was clear and effective.

## **Summary**

Long before students begin their transition journey from high school; it is in the best interest of parents to take a very active role in their educational needs, and in the identification of support services and educational challenges (Ingraham, 2001). For students who are deafblind, it is imperative that parents maintain updated records and resource information regarding special accommodation needs, community programs that can provide support during and after school hours, and recommendations for goals beyond the high school program. Any exposure to real life work situations where money can be earned for performing chores or tasks can be valuable. Likewise, opportunities to meet with mentors, peers, family members, and friends who are willing to share information about their own work experiences can help the deafblind student form a clear understanding of the world of work, employment related responsibilities, and the expectations employers have of their workers.

Situational work assessments are invariably the best indicators for determining what work environments or careers are best suited for deafblind students. Cooperation from the surrounding businesses and community programs can offer tremendous insights to the student who has never experienced the "real world" of work (Grossi, Schaaf, Steigerwald, & Thomas, 2004). Many school programs across the country have forged relationships with businesses in the local community as a way to expose deafblind students to authentic work settings, along with all the responsibilities, expectations, and rewards that go along with being employed. A framework of this nature can help to steer deafblind students into successful competitive employment situations as they prepare to journey from high school to the world of work and independence.

## Appendix A: School To Work Rubric

AGE 14	AGE 15	AGE 16	AGE 17	AGE 18	AGE 19	AGE 20	AGE 21
Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews	Parent, teacher, student interviews
Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP	Participate in IEP
Extra curricular activities, community, church, mentorship programs	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs;	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs;	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs;	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs;	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs;	Extra curricular activities in school, community groups, church groups, mentorship programs;
Begin ADL skills training (orientation mobility, banking, budgeting, shopping, conduct on line searches for resources, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation	Continue ADL skills training, assign household chores, meal planning and preparation
Draft personal vision statement	Review personal vision statement as part of IEP	Review personal vision statement as part of IEP	Review personal vision statement as part of IEP	Review personal vision statement as part of IEP	Review/Revise personal vision statement as part of IEP	Review/Revise personal vision statement as part of ITP	Review/Revise personal vision statement as part of ITP
Paper and pencil assessments	Paper and pencil assessments	Discuss potential job interests and goals	Job shadow activities on and off campus	Job shadow activities on and off campus; Paper and pencil or functional assessments	Job shadow activities on and off campus; Paper and pencil or functional assessments	Job shadow activities on and off campus; Discuss potential job interests and goals	Work experience off campus
Classroom exposure to work tasks	Classroom and community exposure to work tasks	Community work experience program during school hours	Community work experience during school hours; begin summer job	Community work experience program during school hours	Community work experience program during school hours; summer job	Community work experience program during school hours; summer job	Community work experience program during school hours; summer job

Because many of the essential skills for successful employment and independent living take time for deafblind students to master, it is recommended that many skill areas are addressed annually.