

Communicating Interagency Relationships and Collaborative Linkages for Exceptional Students (CIRCLES)

Transition planning is a critical process that equips students with disabilities for life after high school. Despite federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014), students with disabilities often face significant disparities in post-school outcomes. While collaboration among educators, families, and adult service providers is essential, barriers such as unclear roles and inconsistent communication often impede progress. Leveraging evidence-based frameworks such as Communicating Interagency Relationships and Collaborative Linkages for Exceptional Students (CIRCLES) is key to addressing these challenges and ensuring successful transitions for students with disabilities.

What is CIRCLES?

CIRCLES is an evidence-based approach designed to enhance interagency collaboration in transition planning. CIRCLES operates through three levels of collaboration:

- **Community Level Team** – Composed of administrators from agencies that provide support for transition, this team identifies systemic gaps and overlaps in services, facilitating policy and practice changes.
- **School Level Team** – This team includes direct service providers who meet with students and families to address individual transition goals related to education, employment, and independent living.
- **Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team** – Information and plans from School Level Team meetings are incorporated into the IEP to ensure alignment with students' post-school goals.

Though each team operates with distinct responsibilities, they collaborate cohesively to tackle transition planning challenges for individual students with disabilities. The CIRCLES approach specifically focuses on students with disabilities who require coordination among multiple adult service

agencies to achieve positive post-school outcomes. Through this tiered structure, CIRCLES streamlines coordination, maximizes resources, and fosters student-centered planning.

What the Research Says

Research on CIRCLES demonstrates significant positive impacts on student outcomes. Students involved in CIRCLES have increased self-determination skills and are more actively engaged in their transition planning compared to students not involved in CIRCLES (Flowers et al., 2017). Additionally, stakeholders (i.e., parents, students, interagency members) report high levels of satisfaction with CIRCLES. Students and parents felt actively involved in the transition planning process and believed students were well-prepared for post-school life. Stakeholders also noted high levels of interagency collaboration resulting from CIRCLES implementation (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018). CIRCLES enhances communication and collaboration across all three levels - community, school, and IEP - creating a cohesive support system.

The broader research on interagency collaboration highlights why structured approaches like CIRCLES are effective. Frequent communication and clear role definitions among stakeholders are essential elements that improve transition service alignment (Plotner et al., 2020). When these elements are present, students with disabilities experience more seamless transitions and better post-school outcomes.

Despite the benefits, challenges exist when implementing CIRCLES. Common barriers include difficulty coordinating schedules, ensuring consistent stakeholder participation, inadequate training, and various logistical hurdles (Plotner et al., 2020; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018). Flowers et al. (2017) note that lack of training and logistical challenges can hinder the implementation of models like CIRCLES, highlighting the need for robust support systems to overcome these obstacles.

Guidelines for Practice

To enhance transition outcomes, educators and service providers should consider the following recommendations:

- **Clarify Roles and Responsibilities** – Clearly define the roles of all stakeholders to foster better understanding and collaboration within the transition team.
- **Implement Structured Models** – Adopt frameworks like CIRCLES to ensure consistent and effective interagency collaboration. Regular meetings at the community, school, and IEP levels can improve coordination and accountability.
- **Provide Comprehensive Training** – Equip educators, service providers, and families with the knowledge and tools to actively participate in transition planning.
- **Engage Students and Families** – Encourage student-led presentations and active family involvement in transition planning to promote self-determination and alignment with individual goals.
- **Overcome Logistical Barriers** – Develop systems for scheduling, follow-up, and communication to ensure consistent participation and accountability among stakeholders.

By integrating these practices, educators can create more effective and equitable transition processes, enabling students with disabilities to achieve their post-school aspirations.

Additional Resources

CIRCLES: Interagency Collaboration Webinar

<https://transitioncoalition.org/webinars/circles-inter-agency-collaboration/>

References

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