

A Path Forward: Building a Transition Program for Rural Students with Disabilities



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Audience Info



Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify **key components** of effective post-secondary transition programs for rural high school students with disabilities.
- Develop **strategies to build and sustain partnerships** with local businesses, agencies, and community organizations to support student transitions.
- **Leverage local supports** to expand access to education, employment, and independent living opportunities.



Demographics

Schools Served:

- 41 public schools
- 12 parochial schools
- 3 alternative placements

➤ Rural Area: 1638.13 miles

Population Density:

Marion County: 65 people per square mile vs
City of Chicago: 12,000 people per square mile

➤ Students with IEP's: 3000+; 400+ with 504 Plans



Why Focus on Rural Transition?

- Rural youth with disabilities experience **poorer post-school outcomes**
- Geographic context **shapes access** to services and opportunities
- Federal transition **requirements apply universally**, but implementation differs

Carter et al., 2020



Rural Transition Outcomes: What the Data Shows

- **Lower** employment and postsecondary **enrollment rates**
- **Reduced access** to coordinated transition services
- Greater **reliance on informal supports**

Lombardi et al., 2018



Structural Barriers in Rural Communities

- Limited **transportation** options
- **Fewer** adult service **providers**
- **Smaller** labor **markets**
- **Staffing and funding** constraints

Carter et al., 2020



Reframing the Challenge

From: Deficits & Scarcity

To: Assets, relationships, and flexibility

- Rural communities have **strong social capital**
- **Relationships** frequently substitute formal systems



What Works: Evidence-Based Transition Predictors

- Paid work experience during high school
- Family engagement in transition planning
- Interagency collaboration
- Person centered planning

Mazzotti et al. (2016; 2021)



Components



Component 1: Paid Work Experiences

- Strongest predictor of post-school employment
- Can include part-time, seasonal, or customized work
- Quality and relevance matter more than hours

Mazzotti et al. (2016; 2021)



Component 2: Person-Centered & Strengths-Based Planning

- Focus on interests, preferences, and strengths
- Use discovery rather than standardized assessment alone
- Align goals with local opportunities

Callahan et al., 2011



Component 3: Integrated Transition Instruction

- Embed transition skills across academic and functional instruction
- Teach skills in real-world contexts
- Promote generalization beyond school

Wehman et al., 2014



Partnerships



Why Partnerships Matter in Rural Areas

- Fewer agencies increase the **importance of collaboration**
- **Partnerships** often replace formal infrastructure
- **Trust** and consistency are critical



Key Rural Transition Partners

- Local employers and small businesses
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Centers for Independent Living
- Community colleges and extension offices
- Government agencies

Who would you add?



Effective Partnership Practices

- **Relationship**-based engagement
- Focus on **mutual benefit**
- **Shared problem-solving** rather than placement-first approaches

Carter et al., 2012; Plotner & Dymond, 2017



Leveraging Rural Strengths

- Tight-knit communities
- High **family** involvement
- Long-standing **employer** relationships
- **Informal** but **reliable** support networks

Other strengths?



Local Supports



Types of Local Supports

- **Education:** tutoring, before and after school programs, adult education, scholarships, peer mentor/tutor
- **Employment:** internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, training, mentoring, local partnerships
- **Independent Living:** housing assistance, transportation, supported and supervised living options, health services, adult service programs

What do you see in your area?



Strategies to Leverage Supports

- Community Mapping
- **Relationship building** with local businesses, nonprofit organizations and agencies
- **Program development:** integration of life skills, education and employment
- **Outcome tracking:** demonstrate the impact and importance of programs and allow for improvement



Expanding Opportunities Through Local Supports

- Community resource mapping
- **Family engagement** as a formal strategy
- Flexible transportation solutions
- Customized employment and job carving

Condon & Callahan, 2008; Francis et al., 2018



Introducing Rural Cultural Wealth

- Traditional rural transition work is often framed through deficit perspectives
- Rural Cultural Wealth reframes rurality as asset-rich
- Focuses on strengths embedded in rural people, relationships, and places

Crumb et al. (2023)



Rural Cultural Wealth: Core Constructs

- Rural Resourcefulness – navigating and overcoming limited resources
- Rural Ingenuity – creative problem-solving and innovation
- Rural Familism – intergenerational and kinship-based supports
- Rural Community Unity – collective action and mutual aid

Crumb et al. (2023)



Why Rural Cultural Wealth Matters for Transition

- Counters deficit-based assumptions about rural students and families
- Aligns with person-centered, strengths-based transition planning
- Helps educators recognize informal supports as legitimate transition assets

Crumb et al. (2023)



Sustainability Through Rural Cultural Wealth

- Programs rooted in local culture are more durable
- Relationships increase continuity despite staff turnover
- Asset-based approaches strengthen long-term partnerships

Crumb et al. (2023)



Key Takeaways

- Evidence-based transition practices remain effective in rural settings when adapted
- Community partnerships and local assets are foundational
- Rural cultural wealth provides a powerful framework for equitable transition design



Closing & Acknowledgments

Effective rural transition programs are built on relationships, responsiveness, and respect for local context.

Thank you!



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