

## Testimony for Transition Coordinators – June 16, 2009

Good afternoon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Patricia Pakos and I am here to provide testimony on the Transition Coordinator Bill. I am representing The Arc of Massachusetts, as I work for them as a Disability Consultant and myself as a parent of a daughter with significant disabilities

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The Arc of Massachusetts, the largest advocacy group in the Commonwealth representing individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities strongly supports the Transition Coordinator Bill.

Nearly 17% of Massachusetts public school students are students with disabilities. 56,078 are between the ages of 14 and 21 (MASSDE 2007). These numbers represent a wide spectrum of students with either some type of learning disability or intellectual and/or developmental disability. A February, 2007 report from MADOE states that 5.6% of Massachusetts students with disabilities drop out of school versus 3.8% of their nondisabled peers. This certainly is a population best served by Transition Coordinators or teachers with these skills. At present in Massachusetts, teachers of middle school students and high school teachers are not required to have any competencies in Transition. However, the Federal Law IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) Transition 2004 places great emphasis on Transition especially because the unemployment rates of individuals with disabilities has remained at 70% for the past 20 years. The purpose of IDEA is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living. [601 (d) (1) 9A). Their unique needs can be described as the child's strengths, preferences, and interests. Transition services, according to IDEA, is a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that:

- Is designed to be within 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 postsecondary education; vocational education; integrated employment (including support employment); continuing and adult education; adult services; independent living or community participation.

Since I work with the population of individuals with disabilities who have intellectual and/ or developmental disabilities let me give you two examples of how a transition coordinator could make an enormous difference in the lives of young people.

Dan is an 18 year old young man with Down Syndrome. He is the oldest of four children. He is bright, personable, and has a pretty good sense of what he wants his life to look like. Dan was assigned to a life skills special education classroom in the local high school. He has been included in a science class, a digital photography class and gym. The rest of his day is spent in the life skills classroom. He has had

two work experiences while in high school; bagging groceries in the local grocery store and delivering magazines to the floors in the local hospital. He was fortunate because at 18 he had already two job experiences however, neither he nor his family were ever asked if he wanted to do that type of work. In fact, he hated both jobs. In sitting down with the young man and his family, I discovered that he loved to cook and was hoping to work in a restaurant some day. He also stated that one day he would like to live in an apartment with a roommate not a group home in the same town as his parents. We developed a life plan for this young man looking ahead 5 years. We looked at the skills he would need to live in an apartment: cooking, shopping, making appointments, paying bills, working, cleaning, recreation, volunteering, etc... We then met with his educational team at school and presented our information. As a result, the school developed a transition plan that enabled Dan to work in the kitchen of a local nursing home and incorporated into his education plan were goals to help him read simple recipes, learn money skills, shop, safety around electrical appliances, help in taking an active role in his IEP meetings, and physical exercise such as swimming and use of the gym. His family also agreed to help Dan with cooking, cleaning, making friends, volunteering and more independence in the community, etc...

My youngest daughter, Rachel, has significant disabilities. She was a student in Massachusetts schools beginning at age 7 until age 22. When she was 16, I completed a Master's degree in Severe Special Needs. As a result of my studies, I became acutely aware of the Transition process. Notably, that topic had not been brought up by the school system. Upon becoming informed, I began to work with the school system around goals that seemed most important to enable Rachel to achieve as much independence and skills as possible before age 22. At the age of 19, because her goals were not being met a decision was made for her to enter an Independent Living Program at Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA and she resided there until the age of 22. This program cost our town \$80,000 a year. We did not want her to live away from home but these skills that she needed were not being taught in her school. If a Transition Coordinator has been employed by the school system or a teacher who had these skills, an awareness of her needs and a program addressing them would have begun even before the age of 14. We would have saved the town a lot of money.

Transitional planning should begin from age 14, the goals on a student's education plan should reflect areas of need that will enable the student to become as independent as possible in all areas of living whether it be school, home or community and these goals should make the biggest difference in his/her life.

Times have changed. No longer do our students with disabilities and their families feel that sheltered workshops and day rehabilitation centers or institutions are where adults with disabilities belong.

Children with disabilities want to reside, work, and enjoy social lives in their communities and their parents expect that dream to become a reality. However, the transition from school to adult life is a winding road that many families who have a child with a disability find difficult to navigate. We can help them tremendously by placing skilled teachers in our school systems.

**An Act to Ensure Students with Disabilities Succeed as Adults:  
Transition Coordinators  
H. 493  
Testimony**

My name is Dr. Arlyn Roffman. I have been a professor at Lesley University for nearly 35 years. From 1981-96 I served as the founding director of Threshold, a non-degree transition program for young adults with multiple disabilities based on our Cambridge campus. Over the course of my 15 years at Threshold and during the ensuing years, the major focus of my scholarship and private practice as a licensed psychologist has been working on issues related to transition. My most recent book, targeted to parents, is focused on that topic.

I have been called in as an expert in more than a dozen cases related to transition to assess the readiness of a young person with special needs for entry into adult life. Too often in these cases the youth has NOT been prepared for employment, community inclusion, or the transition to post-secondary learning. I often see districts struggling to understand their obligation under the law and often witness committed, skilled teachers struggling to provide transition services without the requisite training to do so effectively. A broad range of issues put schools out of compliance with IDEA: too many fail to plan the course of studies around the students' individual needs and try to fit the student into what is already available through the district; too many fail to address all of the arenas of adult life prescribed by the law - including not just work, but community integration and continued learning; too many fail to develop required IEP transition goals; too many fail to write required *measurable* goals that build upon a student's strengths.

I have observed inefficiencies, low expectations, and lost opportunities to meet the students' needs head-on. For example, in one district, a young man with

ADHD was supported by a very costly full-time aide who got him through the day by writing down his homework assignments and sitting with him as he completed his work, but who never worked with him to develop the self-determination, organization, or study skills that would enable him to make the transition to college that was his expressed vision on his IEP. In another case, a young man had the same 20-minutes-per-day “job” in the school store for his entire four years in high school. He was never given the opportunity to grow in his responsibilities or explore other professional avenues and by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade was certainly not prepared for employment with such a limited skill set; his school nonetheless believed his experience fulfilled their obligation to provide vocational training. Yet, with a trained professional at the helm of planning and overseeing transition services, I have also seen districts develop program models that focus on the full range of transition services and provide the community-based learning that is so important for generalization of skills learned.

Since leaving my role as Director of Threshold, I have been a teaching faculty member at Lesley. In that capacity my duties have revolved around teacher preparation. Although we do a fine job in this capacity, even we have not been able to offer the level of training required for the Transition Coordinator role we are proposing. Like our fellow institutions, we find it impossible to address the full range of transition competencies for the Transition Coordinator position within our standard special education 5-12 teacher preparation program; advanced training is essential to teach the extensive set of complex skills necessary to complete this job effectively.

I believe towns will be able to serve their students well when there are personnel in their schools who understand the scope of transition and who have the unique set of skills to meet the individual needs of youth aged 14-21 with disabilities. I

believe too many resources are being poorly utilized, that districts could be in compliance and avoid costly hearings, and, most importantly, foster the full potential of students with disabilities if they had trained professionals to plan and oversee implementation of transition services. It is for that reason I strongly support the creation of the Transition Coordinator position and the level of advanced training that it entails.

**An Act to Ensure Students with Disabilities Succeed as Adults:  
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My name is Debra Hart, I am the Director of Education and Transition for the Institute for Community Inclusion, at the University of Massachusetts, in Boston. I have worked nationally and statewide with students with disabilities, their families, general and special educators, Institutes of Higher Education, and adult service rehabilitation personnel in the area of transition for the past 20 years.

As previously noted, adult outcomes for students with disabilities continue to remain significantly below their peers without disabilities, and research demonstrates that such poor postsecondary outcomes are due, in part, to special education teachers who are not prepared to plan and provide effective transition services (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; Benetiz, Morningstar, & Frey, 2008). Secondary special education teachers may have some of the basic competencies related to developing Individual Education Plans (IEP) focused on transition but the quality of their skills in this area varies immensely. More importantly, an additional complex range of skills and a rich knowledge base of the myriad of adult service options including rehabilitation services—knowledge other than writing an IEP and delivering more traditional outdated special education services— are needed to create and deliver effective transition services for students with disabilities. Otherwise, students will not achieve successful postsecondary outcomes in the areas of postsecondary education, competitive employment, and overall community living (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001; Kleinhammer-Tramill, Geiger & Morningstar, 2003).

Preparing qualified transition personnel is recognized in the literature on transition as one of the critical factors to improving the outcomes of students with disabilities (Blalock et al., 2003; Kohler & Greene, 2004). Unfortunately, this knowledge base and set of skills extend well beyond what teachers receive within their pre-service or in-service training (Anderson et al., 2003; Morningstar & Clark, 2003; Benetiz, et al, 2008). At best, personnel preparation programs either provide one course on the transition requirements mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or those requirements are integrated across several courses. Either way, research reveals that the breath of information covered on transition is woefully insufficient (Morningstar & Clark, 2003). Regrettably, teacher preparation programs and in-service training in Massachusetts mirrors this national trend resulting in too many special educators who are not prepared to support students with disabilities in achieving improved post-school outcomes. Not because educators don't want to but rather because they don't know how.

Clearly, we are past due in needing to change how teachers are educated about research based transition practices; the time is now to make this overdue change thus ensuring that teacher education goes beyond rudimentary elements of transition planning and ceases to perpetuate these poor post-school student outcomes. Based on existing research on transition and my professional experience, it is my opinion that the proposed Act to Ensure Students with Disabilities Succeed as Adults: Transition Coordinators H. 493 will do just that. Massachusetts needs both quality pre-service and in-service options that prepare future and current educators as Transition Coordinators if we are ever going to see improved student outcomes.

The move toward providing highly trained Transition Coordinators in public schools to respond to the pressing transition needs of youth with disabilities reflects a growing national trend. A year ago I co-hosted a meeting on the need for qualified Transition Coordinators as part of the Transition Community of Practice, the Office of Special Education Programs, and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center annual national meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina. This was a 7 am meeting with many other competing sessions and there were a minimum of 14 other states in attendance (e.g., New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, California, Wisconsin, Arizona, Washington, DC) and not all states had yet arrived for the larger meeting! There was unanimous consensus that states needed to take a leadership role in ensuring that there would be highly qualified Transition Coordinators and that OSEP needed to try to implement changes in IDEA for the upcoming reauthorization to reflect this need. More recently, the federal Department of Education specifically suggested to states that a use of the IDEA stimulus funds consistent with core reform goals is to “Hire transition coordinators to work with employers in the community to develop job placements for youth with disabilities.” Together, I believe these rather simple examples demonstrate a powerful national recognition of the need for highly trained Transition Coordinators.

Preparing to leave high school is an exciting and tense time for all students and their families. Ensuring that special education teachers are prepared to support students with disabilities and their families as they enter adult life and it’s complexities is critical. Enacting this bill will speak volumes about how we as a society view youth with disabilities and underscore that as a state, we believe in students potential for success and are willing to invest in them.

## References

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If I **were** a teacher today in a Massachusetts middle or high school and I was thinking of obtaining a Master's degree, if schools of education offered a Master's degree in Transition Coordination, I would jump at the chance to develop these skills. **We would save the Commonwealth an enormous amount of money.**

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