



Strategies for Helping Young Adults in Transition: A Mother's Wisdom

By Katherine Carol

East High School called today. On the phone was my daughter's work-study coordinator. With only a few more weeks until graduation, my thoughts were on how, finally, all those years of working with, cajoling and sometimes fighting the school were about to come to an end. The coordinator tells me, "Mikelle has been nominated and voted an "Outstanding Senior" and will be honored with other students in a ceremony in May. We are very pleased with her accomplishments at East High School."

Twenty years ago, as a young mom with an infant daughter, those words were exactly my hopes and dreams for her. I was determined that her disability would not hold her back from a typical life. While, by many standards, our life has been anything but typical, all the years of involvement are beginning to bear fruit. Mikelle experiences significant cerebral palsy, which today puts her in the most unemployed group of people in the country—and also gives her the opportunity to use many assistive technology devices for mobility and communication.

Mikelle represents a new group of young people who are just coming into the adult service delivery system. They come to adult service providers with cell phones, computers and a lifetime of inclusionary experiences in

the regular classroom. Most of their friends don't have disabilities. Yet, many providers in the adult system still separated people with disabilities. They didn't think of technology and disabilities in the same breath—and looked only for jobs for these kids that are physical in nature (even though nowadays 95% of jobs interact with some kind of technology).

However, many of these students now have work experience. Take Mikelle as an example. By her graduation she will have had four jobs, with two paying \$100 an hour. Acting and presenting may not be full-time work, but they are well paying. Her other jobs have all been around \$7 to \$8 an hour, working at the local Botanic Gardens, helping out with their youth program and as an intern doing legislative lobbying and ADA training for a local advocacy group.

Yes, Mikelle is an outstanding senior, and exceptional, but there are many other young adults who are just as exceptional. Compare her life to one of her young friends, who graduated at 18 and has been sitting home watching TV ever since. Now, her mom is on disability as well. What is the difference between these two young women?

It is preparation. It is anticipating the future. It is creating opportunities and working with the systems and

providers who are there to build and sustain that future.

What can educators, vocational rehabilitation counselors and service providers do to give these young adults in transition more opportunities for success? Here are some strategies to consider:

1. Think about "work" differently. Work for these kids isn't just an entry level job. Entry level can be an effective introduction but without a career plan it just becomes a series of jobs that lead to nowhere. In career planning, having a basic understanding of economic development in your community is helpful. Who has a growing business, what industries are in the decline? What companies are automating, outsourcing or sending jobs abroad? One of the fastest growing segments of our economy is in health care; where do people with disabilities fit in that industry? Explore other options to traditional employment. Look at micro enterprises, self-employment and small business; this is where some of the outsourcing is going. Answer these questions: What role will technology play in employment in the next few years? How will people with disabilities get access to it?

Educators, VR counselors and service providers are encouraged to also look at what skills young adults

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will need to sustain employment as jobs go away. While they are in high school, get teenagers involved in other mainstream groups focused on career development. Find clubs that inspire small business development for youth. Many of the kids in those clubs will become future employers, and what better way for them to learn the contributions people with disabilities can make in the workplace?

2. Get families involved and help them succeed. Providers and staff come and go. For these young people with disabilities, “womb to tomb” services may not be an option. We are dealing with a different group of parents in this generation. Their needs will be different from parents whose adult children did not get the benefit of inclusionary education. They are younger and healthier, and are often very connected to the business community—involve them in the job development process too.

When I travel around the country giving presentations, I often hear the negative comments about parents. What these comments tell me is we have neglected to make it safe for families to get involved and we have provided them with a minimum amount of information in a very complex system of supports. Frequently the resistance to participation is simply frustration built up over the years at being sidelined by professionals—or by fear of the unknown. Look at what families are afraid of and ask yourself, what is getting involved going to cost families?

I remember that Mikelle’s first job cost me several thousands of dollars. I can look at it as an investment of out

of pocket dollars and lost income, but the real impact was in how it affected my life. Here are some of the reasons why it had such an effect on our family.

- Vocational Rehabilitation wasn’t prepared to fund someone who was sixteen for employment. Just getting her eligibility was challenging.
- Summer jobs are rare for kids with disabilities. Summer jobs have never really been a part of the transition process either for the schools or for Vocational Rehabilitation, and no one had ever done this before. Additionally, neither system was prepared for a family member actually finding their child a job!
- Cost. I had to pay the job coach out of my own pocket the first year. As a result of this experience, and due to a wonderful transition specialist from the school district, a collaborative agreement was made between our local school district and our local VR office for the next year. The school would take its extended school year dollars, which would have been used for summer school, and use this to provide a job coach for Mikelle for the first four weeks of her summer job. Vocational rehabilitation would pick up the remaining two weeks. It took creativity, looking for ways to make it work for all parties.
- Lack of trained staff. That first summer we had a brand new job coach who had no idea what she was doing. She had a good heart, she just had not received any training yet. Her agency frequently pulled her off the job to help out someone else or to attend

meetings. The assumption was that our family (meaning me) would either fill in for her or keep her at home instead of working. Yet each time we faced a change of plans, I faced adjustments in my schedule. It became so challenging, I wondered if it was really worth it. I began to see why many families who don’t understand the value of employment would just be overwhelmed by these challenges.

3. Understand transition doesn’t happen in an hour. I am surprised to know how many providers first get involved a few months before graduation. Typically, faced with lean resources, even the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor doesn’t participate until the end of school. Families are introduced to the social security system just before the young adult turns eighteen years of age. Yet, if they had been counseled, they could have been contributing to a PASS account for a number of years, or creating a transition fund for their graduating student, much like saving for college for their typical children. This begs the question, when should the adult service delivery system get involved?

I believe they should be showing up at the early childhood meetings. To go back to Mikelle’s friend, who is less disabled than she is, limited vision equates to a limited life. Who will be the one to help parents see their kids working after graduation? The schools? Not likely. It has to come from people who know how to get jobs for people with disabilities. Parents need information and more—they need a vision of what is possible planted in their minds early on. Every decision they make for their children

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while in school will either take them down the path of employment or leave them nothing after graduation.

4. Make sure families know how the systems work. We are fortunate to have had much support and expertise from others over the years to get what we need in these complex systems. Mikelle has a PASS Plan. From what I read, she is one of 80 or so young adults with a PASS Plan in the entire country. With her PASS she was able to purchase an adapted van to help with her transportation needs as a paid consultant working for me. Mikelle is currently scheduled to present at five conferences, both locally and around the country.

Mikelle is also part of a Consumer Directed Assistance pilot program in Colorado (CDAS), where she now finds, interviews and hires her own personal care staff and has flexibility to pay her own staff whatever she thinks she needs to. She is their direct employer, not an agency. She has carried this concept over to her Supported Living Services and hires her own staff, giving her control and flexibility regarding her support. Two separate agencies act as the intermediary service organizations handling payroll for her employees. Each of these programs is getting extraordinary results for the individuals served.

This approach builds on a blended funding model of support. While not new between agencies, it is not wide-

ly used on individual budgets. Approaching supports from this angle gives power to self-determination. Without the money behind it, it is more a concept than a reality.

Creativity, imagination and early involvement help providers meet the needs of the next generation of individuals seeking employment services. True and relevant information about the workforce and the changes that are affecting our economic development and communities is critical for setting up young people for jobs that won't be outsourced or made obsolete in their near future. Training, training and more training for job development and coaching professionals ensures consistency, low turnover and greater capacity for our future generations.

