

Town Hall Meeting presentation on 12-6-10

Topic: Transitioning Youth

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Not too long ago I was the parent of two young boys. My older son was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3 and my younger son was diagnosed with ADHD and a speech-language impairment at the age of 4 (later diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome). Time has passed quickly and those two young boys have transformed into a teenager age 15 and a young adult age 18, making them part of a large group of individuals known collectively as “Transitioning Youth”. I am scared about their future, and here’s why...

In Anne Arundel County Public Schools, approximately 2,400 students receiving special education services are aged 14 through age 21. Unfortunately, with the ever-rising number of students being diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, this number is also going to rise like a tidal wave at an alarming rate as these young children with new diagnoses grow into teens and young adults. The social, emotional, and behavioral complexities which come with that scenario are immense. If you’d like a peek into that world, please feel free to visit my house any time.

There are many things that are done by and through the school system to help Transitioning Youth and their families navigate the complicated transition process. Transition planning is made a key focus of IEP meetings for both diploma and certificate bound students beginning at age 14. This involves identifying goals, programs, services, and supports to assist the student in appropriate academic and/or vocational activities, including when appropriate life-skills training and work-site participation.

The goal, of course, is for the exiting student to be able to move forward in a seamless fashion into the adult world of employment, further education, housing, and recreation/leisure activities within their preferred community of friends and neighbors so that they will live a successful, productive, enjoyable and meaningful life as independently as possible.

Tragically, the achievement of this goal is hampered by a myriad of obstacles which must be struggled against in heroic fashion on a daily basis by the individual and their family members. Why? Because the individual is moving from an entitlement program of school-based services to programs that are based on eligibility, many of which have limited resources and extensive waiting lists. As the parent of two young men who are quickly approaching the end of their years in the school system, I cannot tell you how un-nerving it is to be told by more than one well-intended and knowledgeable individual that young people simply fall off a cliff after they get out of the school system when it comes to receiving necessary services in all areas, including housing, employment, transportation, medical care and mental health care, to name a few.

So what needs to be done to change this frightening picture? To build and implement a model of truly seamless transition, so that the valuable years spent building the student's skills and preparing them for the adult world are not tragically wasted?

The first thing that needs to be done is to ensure that funding continues to be in place every year for the Governor's Transitioning Youth Initiative, otherwise known as GTYI. GTYI is in many cases the only hope for exiting students – here's why.

Through GTYI the Developmental Disabilities Administration, in collaboration with the Division of Rehabilitative Services, funds supported employment and other day services for eligible students age 21. Without this funding, approximately 700 young adults statewide every year would be placed on a lengthy waiting list for adult services, leaving them with no employment or other supports except through their family. There is no other funding source available to provide this type of assistance to pay for these services.

The second thing that needs to be done is to find ways to address the multiple other obstacles that face transitioning youth and their families. Here is a brief list of those issues:

Finding a sufficient number of qualified medical and mental health providers who can do two things: meet the often complex needs of adults with disabilities and accept Medical Assistance, because the vast majority of adults with disabilities have Medicaid as their insurance provider.

Finding ways to ensure that adults with disabilities have the necessary Assistive Technology devices which were made available during their school years but which are taken away upon their exiting from school.

Finding ways to ensure that post-secondary educational programs, be they community college, 4-year universities, or vocational programs, have the ability to adequately accommodate the sometimes complex and unique needs of adults with disabilities.

Finding ways to ensure that employment opportunities are made available to adults with disabilities which align with their skills and interests and that provide the supports they require to be successful participants in the world of work.

Finding ways to ensure that housing opportunities are made available within the individual's preferred community which align with viable transportation, shopping, recreation and leisure, etc.

Can these be accomplished? Absolutely – they require leaders within the government and within the community who recognize that this population of individuals, who have worked hard for many years of school to prepare for the adult world, must not – cannot – be allowed to fall off of that cliff upon graduation.