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CAREER EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

Abstract:

This article discusses the importance of career education for special education students. Special education students need career education as much or more than regular education students. The laws and procedures of special education and career development in the United States guide the development of state and local programs. In addition, national professional counseling associations provide models and standards of practice. The role of the school counselor is crucial in the development of comprehensive guidance programs that provide services for special education students. One aspect of the school counsellor role, the Individual Transition Plan process, is discussed in greater detail. School counselors advocate for special education students in special education meetings, at the school site, and in the community. The key to a special education student's success in K-12 and postsecondary pursuits and in transition to life and the world of work is often dependent upon the assistance the student and his/her family receive from the school counselor and student support personnel during the early years of education.

Introduction

...elementary schools are creatively integrating general and special education programs; parents are being given a legitimate voice in policy decision-making; and more disabled children are in regular schools than ever before. Yet there are still many obstacles to overcome before a truly equitable system is achieved.

Madelon Cloud (1999)

One of the remaining challenges for full integration of general and special education programs for special education students is the full implementation of career education programs into the curriculum for all children. Special education students, those students receiving accommodations in the regular classroom or program modifications with placement in special education classes, must be included in the mainstream of career counseling and career development programs from kindergarten through 12th grade. The future of many special education students depends on the participation of these students

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in post secondary training programs. School counselors need to work with the parents of special education students to increase awareness of the educational opportunities available for their children. Career education will prepare special education students for fulfilling and successful lives and instill in them the desire for life long learning.

The Needs of Special Education Students

In California there has recently been a renewed interest in Career Technical Education in part to meet the needs of employers and also to motivate students who are dropping out of school. Dean Gabriel Meehan asserts: "Face it, instant gratification is not going away. Provide students with interesting activities and hands on projects and it is guaranteed they will learn." (*The California School Counselor*, 2005). Certainly if the regular curriculum is in need of career education, the special education programs are even more in need of viable career education for their students. Special education students need normalizing experiences, and inclusion in career education programs is definitely a means of demonstrating to these students and their parents the value of considering their post secondary education and future. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Standards for Counseling Programs and the *ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs* (2005) call for academic, career, and personal/social counseling for all students.

Special education students may need extra help with exploring interests and determining strengths; what better person to provide that extra help than the school counselor with the aid of a career technician. Sacramento State University in California trains career counselors, teaching them how to utilize career resources, create career counseling programs, and train classified personnel to assist them with career programs for all students.

Robert Chope in his recent book *Family Matters* (2006) has made the case for the importance of the involvement of family members in the career planning process. Family members often know the strengths and challenges that their special education children face; parents need to be acquainted with available resources for post secondary training designed especially to assist special education students. Parents can also be enlisted to support maximizing the potential of their special education student. Preconceived ideas about the future of their special education student who has special needs and grief at the loss of a regular child are also areas in which counseling is extremely helpful for families of special education students.

Laws Guiding Special Education in the United States

In the United States four specific federal pieces of legislation dictate the parameters of funding and qualifications for special education: The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, The Individual With Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) 2004, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act providing funding for education became the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. NCLB made schools accountable for student learning through the use of assessment with the goal to ensure that at-risk youth were "not left" behind academically. Accountability

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is measured through an annual yearly progress report (AYP) required by states in order to maintain federal support. At the local level schools were required to make local education plans (LEAP) for the implementation of scientifically-based programs and the spending of education dollars. Sanctions were imposed on local schools if test scores failed to improve and the consequences were cuts in funding, mandates for increased academic support services, replacing staff, or eventually restructuring, privatizing, or state takeover of school districts. An assessment rate of 95 percent student participation was required, and participation rates and assessment data could be averaged over a 3-year period for reporting AYP results. All students including those with disabilities are to be tested annually; provisions for assessment accommodations for special education students were to be included in the Individual Education Program documents. Alternative achievement standards were allowed for those with significant cognitive disabilities in approximately 2 percent of the total student population. For alternative assessment measures teachers could use observation, samples of student work, or criterion referenced tests of specific student competencies. Assessment must be in line with state curriculum standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Although alternative assessment measures are permitted in a small percent of the special education population, there are concerns about testing disabled students. Dollarhide and Lemberger (2006) cited a 2004 public opinion poll of 1, 050 voters; 57 % disapproved of requiring the same tests for disabled students and nondisabled students.

Special education in part is funded through the Individual With Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), reauthorized in 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). School districts are to initiate scientifically based early reading programs, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and early intervening services to address the learning and behavioral needs of children. IDEA 2004 has made some significant changes in rules and regulations for special education in the United States. One of the major changes is that states can no longer require districts to consider an IQ/achievement discrepancy as a criterion for learning disabled eligibility. Scientific, research-based intervention response is part of the evaluation procedures for severely learning disabled (SLD) students. Teachers are receiving additional training to become “highly qualified” to provide special education and inclusion in regular education classes.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is the new alternative to the discrepancy method used to determine if and how students respond to specific changes in curriculum and instruction. Problem solving models such as the “three-tiered model” are being used to provide a larger group of students with intervention to improve learning and test scores. Tier I is primarily early intervention for at-risk students in the general education classroom, using all available school supports and evaluating student progress. Tier II consists of more interventions and ongoing evaluation. For students who are not making progress consistent with standards, remedial services and instructional additions and/or modifications to regular classroom instruction are used. Tier III, after success has not been gained in the previous tiers, provides access to referrals for psychoeducational assessment for learning disabilities (Christo, 2006). More specific and intense remedial instruction through special education as well as regular classroom instruction with modifications are initiated at this level. Individual Education Plans (IEP) and Individual

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Transition (career) Plans (ITP) are written for special education students and constitute legal documents between the school district or other interagency service provider(s) and the parents. ITP plans will be discussed in detail later in this article.

Other options open to students with disabilities not eligible for special education classes are provided through Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Accommodations within the regular curriculum are to be made for qualifying individuals. The requirements for eligibility for 504 accommodations are:

1. A mental or physical impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities which include, but are not limited to caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.
 2. A record of such impairment as described above.
 3. The individual is regarded as having such an impairment as previously described.
- (U.S. Department of Education, 2003)

No extra money or legal protections are offered through this legislation. A student with a 504 plan, due to a permanent leg injury from a car accident, may have an accommodation for longer breaks between classes in order to walk from one class to another class.

For Career Technical Education, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, Public Law 05-332, provides funding and guidelines through the Office of Vocational and Technical education for state basic grants. Career counseling and guidance are included in the funding and defined as:

... a comprehensive, developmental program designed to assist individuals in making and implementing informed educational and occupational choices. A career guidance and counseling program develops an individual's competencies in self-knowledge educational and occupational exploration, and career planning.

(U.S. Department of Education, 2005)

Professional Association Leadership

The National Career Development Association (NCDA), a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA), has teamed up with the Association of Career Resources Network (ACRN), federally funded through Carl Perkins monies, to update and produce the National Career Development Guidelines (NCDG) Framework (America's Career Resource Network, 2005). The framework is organized in three domains: Personal Social Development (PS), Educational Achievement and Lifelong Learning (ED), and Career Management (CM). The eleven goals are coded numerically and by domain. Three indicators (Knowledge Acquisition-K, Application-A, and Reflection-R) or learning stages are derived from *Bloom's Taxonomy* and no longer tied to an individual's age or educational level. An example of the NCDG Framework coding system follows:

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PERSONAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION- PS1.K2 **Identify** your abilities, strengths, skills, and talents

APPLICATION- PS1.A2 **Demonstrate** use of your abilities, strengths, skills, and talents.

REFLECTION- PS1.R2 **Assess** the impact of your abilities, strengths, skills, and talents on your career development.

The American School Counselor Association, the largest division of ACA, developed standards for school counseling programs. The National ASCA Standards for School Counseling Programs include three developmental domains: academic, career, and personal/social. These standards have guided school counseling programs for almost 10 years. Recently the ASCA published *The ASCA National Model; A Framework for School Counseling Programs-Second Edition* (2005) and the *ASCA National Model Workbook* (2004) with the standards as a foundation for counseling programs, adding the 21st century emphasis on accountability and organizational structure. The theme of the ASCA model is systematic change in the way school counseling programs are organized, implemented, and evaluated. The basic themes of the model are counselor leadership and advocacy, system change, and collaboration. The delivery system, based on the Gysbers and Henderson model, advocates for school guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. The management system employs agreements; advisory councils; and use of data, action plans, and time calendars. Accountability is measured in student outcomes using performance standards, program audits, and results reports.

An example of an ASCA National Standard in the Career domain is:

Standard 4: Students will acquire the skills to investigate the world of Work in relation to knowledge of self and to make informed career decisions.
(ASCA, 2005)

In crosswalking this standard with the more extensive National Career Development Guidelines Framework domains and stages, the above examples of PS1.K2, PS1.A2, and PS1.R2 are essential skills for accomplishing ASCA Career Domain Standard 4. Thus the two professional association guidelines can be integrated into a comprehensive counseling and guidance program.

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School Counselor Role

Career education in the United States has a rich legacy of national and professional association regulations and guidelines. What then should be the school counselor role in providing career education for special education students? The school counselor as a service provider for special education students is both an integral part of a comprehensive counseling and guidance program and an important member of a student support services team (Allen & La Torre, 1998). ASCA (2004) in the revised school counselor role position statement recommends the following roles for school counselors:

- Providing assistance with transitions from grade to grade as well as post-secondary options
- Consulting and collaborating with staff and parents to understand the special needs of these students
- Advocating for students with special needs in the school and in the community
- Assisting with the establishment and implementation of plans for accommodations and modifications
- Advocates for students with special needs and is one of many school staff members who may be responsible for providing information as written plans are prepared for students with special needs.

Allen (2004) has outlined the program areas, roles, and functions of a school counselor in the career development domain of a comprehensive counseling and guidance program. The school counselor is a member of the integrated services team of student support personnel raising awareness of the team to career development needs of special education students. On the IEP team the school counselor is the case manager for career education and development, which includes the ITP process for the special education student. As coordinator of the comprehensive counseling and guidance program the school counselor coordinates the program, counsels students, provides career guidance lessons in the classroom, and evaluates the overall program including the career guidance components. In the school system the school counselor as staff member provides in-service presentations on the importance of career education, advocates for the rights of special education students for inclusion in the career education program, and leads and coordinates the career program throughout the school. The school counselor acts as coordinator and collaborator with community agencies developing linkages for career education, vocational training, and work experience programs.

Individual Transition Plan Process

As stated above the school counselor serves as the advocate for the special education students which means representation at Student Study Team Meetings, Individual Education Program planning meetings, 504 meetings, and Individual Transition Plan (ITP) meetings. Allen (2004) discusses the unique function of the school counselor in the Individual Transition Process. Under IDEA 2004 transition plans must be developed and in place by the time the special education child is 16 years old. The ITP like the IEP is a legal document. Key areas of the transition plan are:

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Employment Skills
Community Living Skills
Training/Education
Living Arrangements
Community Recreation/Leisure
Social Emotional Needs
Financial/Economic Needs

In preparation for an ITP meeting key questions that a school counselor might ask a student with the assistance of the parent include:

What are your strengths?
What skills do you need to develop to transition from school to adult life?
What kind of a job or career do you envision in the future?
Do you want to attend a college or community college?
Do you want to prepare for a job through career and technical training?
Do you want to continue to live at home or do you want to live on your own?
How will you earn money to support yourself if you live on your own?
What kind of recreation and leisure activities do you want to participate in?
Are you aware of special programs and resources for special education students?

The ITP meeting focuses on the needs of the special education student and the creation of a purposeful, organized process (the plan) to produce the desired outcomes that will enable the special education student to transition from school to employment and then to a quality adult life. Many educators as well as community specialists may meet to work with the family and student to review relevant data, summarize current functioning and previous goals achieved, develop transition goals and objectives based on identified needs and student preferences and interests, and decide on appropriate interagency linkages. ITP members include special education teacher(s), school counselor, parent and student (when appropriate), administrator, career specialist, regular education teacher(s), school, student support specialist(s), and community specialists that may be providing specialized services for the student.

When a high school student has completed an ITP that student should have a plan for transition to the work world and life. It must be stressed that this is not an end, but just a beginning. For the last two years of high school, the school counselor working with regular and special education teachers, family members, and other specialists must carefully monitor the progress of the special education student. Some students will leave high school ready to continue formal education, others will embark upon specialized training programs in shelters, some may choose to live at home, others may try independent living, or others may need residential placement depending upon their individual needs.

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Conclusion

There is no question that there is a need for career education for special education students. Federal and state laws and professional association guidelines define the career education path for special education students; the school counselor is the guide and mentor along the way. There are many programs designed to assist learning disabled students make their way in the world. Parents must be informed of these resources and programs, such as the special section on Programs and Services for Students With Special Needs in the *Life After High School* student guide (Allen & Hansen, 2006). Parents often need help to access this information that is so important in making their student's life more successful. The school counselor has an important role to play throughout the educational process and career education; it just very well may be the most important service a school counselor can provide for a special education child and their family.

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Additional Resources:

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, Public Law 105-332
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/CTE/perkins.html>

and Career Guidance and Counseling Programs
<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/cgcp.html>

Web site for No Child Left Behind sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.
<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>

National Career Development Guidelines (NCDG) Framework is found at
www.acrnetwork.org/ncdg.htm

Web site for IDEA 2004 News, Information, and Resources
<http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/idea2004.html>