

# Employment Preparation and Life Skill Development Initiatives for High School Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities



*The Professional Counselor*  
Volume 3, Issue 2, Pages 73–81  
<http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org>  
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doi:10.15241/jms.3.2.73

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**Employment preparation and life skill development are crucial in assisting students identified as having emotional and behavioral disabilities with successfully transitioning to adulthood following high school. This article outlines four initiatives that a school counselor developed with other school personnel to promote work skills, life skills, and social and emotional development, which include (a) a school vegetable garden, (b) a raised worm bed, (c) a sewing group, and (d) community collaboration. The authors also discuss implications for school counselors and recommendations for future research.**

**Keywords:** school counseling, life skills, transition, disabilities, adolescents

High school counselors, teachers and other school personnel are in the unique position of providing resources to help students transition from high school to early adulthood. This transition may involve preparation for college or development of employment skills for students who plan to enter the workforce rather than attend college. Life skill development (e.g., communication, problem-solving skills, financial management) is also crucial for young people as they transition out of high school.

The transition from high school to adulthood can be especially difficult for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) defines the term *emotional disturbance* as follows:

A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Specifically in Florida, where the innovative program discussed in this article was developed, a student with an emotional or behavioral disability is defined as having “persistent (is not sufficiently responsive to implemented evidence-based interventions) and consistent emotional or behavioral responses that adversely affect performance in the educational environment that cannot be attributed to age, culture, gender, or ethnicity” (Exceptional Student Education Eligibility for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities, 2009, para.1). In 2000, researchers reported that approximately 230,081 children and adolescents in the United States were receiving services within the serious emotional disturbances category, with an estimated 1.15% within the age range of 13–16 years old (Cameto, Wagner, Newman, Blackorby, & Javitz, 2000). These students often have multiple obstacles to overcome including (a) social, (b) emotional, (c) academic, and (d) environmental challenges (Lehman, Clark, Bullis, Rinkin,

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& Castellanos, 2002). Therefore, it is crucial to create programs to assist these students in developing the knowledge and skills needed to make a successful transition to adulthood.

Transitioning to adulthood may involve continued education or full-time employment. However, young people in general are often ill-prepared to enter the workforce (Burgstahler, 2001); therefore, it is imperative that schools provide job training to help prepare students who plan to enter the workforce following high school. In regard to students with disabilities, the IDEA Amendments of 1997 and the IDEA of 2004 outline the responsibility of schools to help high school students transition to adulthood. Specifically, IDEA requires schools to begin transition planning for students with disabilities by age 14 and to have transition services specified within a student's Individual Education Program (IEP) by age 16 (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007). However, the development of a transition plan alone does not necessarily lead to successful employment following high school (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007); therefore, it is incumbent upon schools to focus on implementing programs designed to assist students with successfully transitioning to adulthood.

## **Employment Preparation and Life Skill Development**

Researchers have examined factors that contribute to the success of students with disabilities following high school. Test et al. (2009) examined the literature and identified 16 in-school predictors of post-high school success: (a) career awareness, (b) community experiences, (c) exit exam requirements/diploma, (d) general education, (e) interagency collaboration, (f) occupational courses, (g) paid work experience, (h) parental involvement, (i) program of study, (j) self-determination and advocacy, (k) self-care/independent living, (l) social skills, (m) student support, (n) transition program, (o) vocational education, and (p) work-study. Additionally, Gore, Kadish, and Aseltine (2003) interviewed young adults who had graduated from high school two years prior to the study to examine how taking a career major in school affects early career work orientation and experience. The researchers found that participation in a program that bridges education to future employment was predictive of more optimistic views about future career aspirations two years later.

Researchers also have examined the relationship between career decisions following high school and mental health. Aseltine and Gore (2005) interviewed seniors and recent high school dropouts and then interviewed them again two years later to examine the psychosocial functioning of individuals following high school. The findings suggested that individuals who attended additional schooling or engaged in full-time employment following high school reported a more positive quality of life and had lower levels of depression, concluding that engagement in structured activities (schooling or employment) on a full-time basis following graduation contributed to greater psychological functioning. This research was not focused specifically on individuals with EBD; however, the findings suggest a relationship between successful post-high school transition and positive psychosocial functioning.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) was designed to examine the post-high school experiences of individuals with disabilities. Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, and Garza (2006) reported that students within the emotional disturbances category had the lowest (56%) school completion rate, except for individuals within the categories of intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities. Additionally, approximately 60% of individuals within the emotional disturbances category were employed at some point; however, only about half (30%) were employed after two years. Also, approximately 20% were enrolled in postsecondary education. Furthermore, in regards to involvement with the legal system, 75% had been stopped by the police for a non-traffic related offense, 58% had been arrested at minimum one time, and 43% had been on probation or parole. The percentage of these students involved in programs designed to promote graduation and foster a successful transition to adulthood is unknown; however, the low graduation rate, low employment rate, and high incident of legal involvement constitutes a need for the establishment of interventions.

Zigmond (2006) examined the career decisions of individuals with severe emotional and behavioral disorders spanning a two-year period following graduation or dropping out of an alternative high school. About half of the participants were employed at each of the five data collection periods (3, 6, 12, 18 and 24 months); however, only three of the 15 who had a job at the three-month point had the same job at the 24-month mark. These findings indicate a higher rate of employment when compared to the NLTS2 findings; however, due to the small sample size in this study, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, Zigmond presents a need for future research to examine the effectiveness of alternative schooling programs on successful transition to adulthood for individuals with EBD. Additionally, Carran, Kerins and Murray (2005) examined the success of individuals who had a positive discharge (graduation) or negative discharge (dropping out) from an alternative school designed for students with EBD over a three-year period. Students who received a positive discharge were more likely to maintain employment and were less likely to be arrested; however, the employment rate declined by year three. The findings of Carran et al. (2005) indicate a positive correlation between successful completion of high school and transition to adulthood; however, further research is needed to determine the long-term benefits of high school training for individuals with EBD. Yet implementing programs in high schools focused on the needs of students with EBD appears to support these individuals in their successful transition to adulthood.

Employment preparation and life skill development are especially important for students with EBD because, in addition to experiencing multiple obstacles in transitioning to adulthood, these individuals may not meet eligibility requirements for vocational rehabilitation following graduation; therefore, students with EBD may lack the needed support and experience to be successful in seeking employment (Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, & Owens, 2011). Additionally, students with EBD may benefit from services designed to foster self-determination, a crucial skill in transitioning to adulthood (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006). Self-determination includes the ability to identify strengths and interests, advocate for oneself (connected to the ability to interact with others [i.e., social skills]), set goals, and evaluate progress in achieving goals (Carter, Trainor, Owens, Swedeen, & Sun, 2010). Therefore, a comprehensive transition program for students with EBD would encompass the development of job skills, self-determination, and social and life skills.

School counselors are crucial in helping develop and implement programs that assist students with transitioning to adulthood. Counselors have an understanding of the developmental needs of students (Granello & Sears, 1999). This knowledge is essential in establishing a successful program. Additionally, school counselors develop and facilitate initiatives within comprehensive school counseling programs guided by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) National Model and the ASCA (2004) National Standards for Students, which emphasize academic, career, and social and personal development. Furthermore, in program development, the counselor is instrumental in coordinating school personnel (teachers, administrators and support staff) and community partners to work toward helping students transition successfully.

A clear need exists for the development of programs for high school students with EBD to facilitate skill development that assists them with successfully transitioning to adulthood. In this article, we, the authors, outline initiatives developed to address this need. We discuss program goals, sustainability, and some preliminary findings regarding program effectiveness.

### **An Innovative School Program**

The second author is a school counselor at a Title I school serving K–12 students who are identified as ESE/EBD (Exceptional Student Education with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities). This tier three school offers special education interventions for the most severe students with ESE/EBD residing in the county. The student population is approximately 70% African American, 29% Caucasian and 1% Hispanic. Eighty-four percent

of the students are male and 26% are female. Additionally, 95% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Most students reside in single-parent homes and many have been “sheltered” as wards of the state, with several students having “relative caregivers.” Twelve percent of the students are currently in foster care or group homes and 13% have been adopted out of foster care. Approximately 4%– 9% of the students are considered homeless under the McKinley-Vento Act.

During the past five years, the second author has observed the transitional difficulties of students. The observations mirror the research on the transition of students identified as ESE/EBD. The students lack social and vocational skills, and exhibit psychological symptoms consistent with their disabilities. The majority of students drop out of school, and many have arrest records and often reoffend after they leave school. A limited number of these students have jobs or are attending general education programs (GED), some are homeless, and some have reported suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. These transitional realities have motivated personnel to brainstorm strategies to address the educational, vocational and transitional needs of students, in hope of preventing current and future students from experiencing the same dismal transition.

The program initiatives were designed to help students (a) learn job skills and obtain vocational education, (b) promote social skills, (c) foster self-determination, and (d) develop life skills. Each of these goals is an in-school predictor of post-high school success identified by Test et al. (2009). After establishing the program goals, the school counselor identified areas of interest within the student body, in order to obtain the students’ interest in the program. Furthermore, the school counselor identified resources to obtain funding and support. Each component of the program was started with seed money provided through small grants. However, after each program component was initiated, it was necessary to develop a plan to sustain the project due to the lack of ongoing funding. Thus, a sustainability plan was integrated within the program initiatives.

The four program initiatives include (a) a school vegetable garden, (b) a raised worm bed, (c) sewing for success, and (d) community collaboration. The program is grounded within two established transitional models discussed by Rutkowski, Daston, VanKuiken, and Riehle (2006). Both models emphasize hands-on experience in developing job skills. The first three program components use the adapted career and technical model framework, which provides both a simulated and real worksite model. This model provides students with the opportunity to develop job skills and obtain work experience, while having the direct support of school personnel. The fourth program component is grounded within the work-study model. Within this framework, students receive instruction in the school and then enter the community to obtain work experience. The program encompasses both models to allow students to transition from the adapted career and technical model to the work-study model after they have developed the skills and experience to help them be successful in community employment.

Creating a program that encompasses both models has several advantages. First, students gradually increase their exposure to work. This approach may decrease anxiety and encourage students to try new things because they are initially surrounded by school personnel who are encouraging and supportive during this process. Additionally, the school establishes strong collaborations with community partners and increases the potential for student success by first training students in the school. Thus, the school establishes a system that promotes success for the students, the school and community partners.

### **Program Initiatives**

**School vegetable garden.** The first initiative developed was the school vegetable garden. The garden is designed to provide high school students with experiences to develop immediate employment-related skills on campus through engagement in all aspects of planning, maintaining and harvesting a garden. Students develop skills in preparing the soil, planning for and selecting types of plants to grow, planting and caring for plants, and harvesting and selling the produce. The garden project allows school personnel to teach and reinforce several

work-related skills. Students learn responsibility through their daily commitment to the garden, which has tangible consequences if not attended to on a regular basis (e.g., plants dying, garden becoming overgrown with weeds, produce rotting). The commitment required for the garden is directly related to employee responsibilities (e.g., arriving at work on time, completing tasks consistently to the best of one's ability). Additionally, students develop social skills through collaboration to maintain the garden, working as team members as if for an employer. Students also obtain life skills (e.g., problem solving) by addressing various issues within the garden (e.g., insects eating the plants, weather conditions) and managing finances through the generation of funds (by selling produce) to sustain the garden. Furthermore, students learn customer service skills through interactions with customers when selling produce. Finally, students develop self-determination skills by identifying strengths in managing the garden and evaluating their progress. Thus, the garden initiative provides opportunities for students to develop skills in each of the areas outlined for the program: job skills and vocational education, social skills, life skills and self-determination.

The garden also provides a metaphor for students' personal growth and development, as well as opportunities to promote students' successes. For example, school counselors can discuss the importance of having nutrient-rich soil to build a foundation for growing healthy, hearty plants, and then connect this metaphor to specific areas within the students' lives where they are developing a solid foundation for their lives. School personnel also encourage students and promote positive self-esteem by identifying students' garden accomplishments. The garden produces tangible results through vegetable growth, and students are able to recognize concrete outcomes throughout their ongoing garden experience. Thus, the initiative provides opportunities for students to develop self-awareness and foster a healthy self-concept.

**Raised worm bed.** The worm bed was developed to provide direct benefits to the vegetable garden and the sustainability of the program. Additionally, students expressed interest in this project. The worm bed promotes sustainability of the garden by providing needed compost (casings). Additionally, students can sell the earthworms, providing financial assistance for the program. The costs of developing the worm garden are minimized by having students develop the beds, which support the development of job skills and vocational training through planning, designing and construction. Likewise, the construction of the worm beds fosters the development of social skills and life skills through teamwork, problem solving and financial management (e.g., maximizing the resources available).

**Sewing for success.** The program experienced an increase in the number of female students, and efforts to have them work in the garden were often met with resistance. The sewing initiative was designed to capture the interest of female students. However, male students also showed an interest in the sewing initiative. This project was combined with a project to support the school's clothing bank (sorting, laundering and repairing clothes), which was established by the school to provide clothing to students in need. The school accepts donations from the community and maintains the clothing bank for students.

Maintaining the clothing bank helps students develop life skills as they learn how to do laundry and repair clothes. Students also develop organizational skills. In addition to maintaining the clothing bank, students create sewing products that they sell (e.g., bags, purses, scarves), which supports the development of job skills (sewing) and life skills (customer service). The school staff reported that a majority of the students, both female and male, express enjoyment with this initiative. Some students reported that the program is more relevant for them, while others reported that it complements the garden, especially on days with inclement weather. Thus, the sewing initiative has enhanced the other initiatives encompassed within the program.

**Community collaboration.** Researchers emphasize the importance of community partnerships in developing transition programs (Lehman et al., 2002). Active engagement with community resources promotes opportunities to continue to learn pro-social behaviors and work skills, vocational education and aptitude

beyond the school. This initiative—grounded within the work-study model—provides opportunities for community work experience while maintaining school support. Students also have the opportunity to pursue an Option 2 diploma, which requires work placement in an on-the-job training or community-based training experience for at least six months. Placement sites have included garden centers, fast-food restaurants and grocery stores.

Community partnerships provide great opportunities for students; however, establishing placements that are a good fit for the student and the business is a vital and crucial consideration. Employers are often not equipped to provide training and supervision to support the students' needs, given the nature of their disabilities and the relative instability of their living situations. Other limiting issues include the number of work hours available and transportation needs for the students. Thus, these experiences require continuous efforts in locating, developing and maintaining work placements. Furthermore, the program must adequately prepare the students for placements and provide ongoing support for the students and their employers.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

The on-campus experiences provide opportunities for school counselors and teachers to work together to support students in developing work aptitude, as well as emotional regulation and self-control. Successful program completion leads to eligibility for pursuit of an Option 2 diploma. The initiatives also foster patience and persistence since maintenance of the garden is required while the crops are growing and other projects must be completed. Through this experience, students learn that rewards are not always instant and that time and hard work is necessary if one is to accomplish goals. Such awareness may serve to support a successful transition to work in the community upon program completion. Developing general work skills, a strong work ethic and social skills may assist individuals with obtaining jobs in various areas following high school.

The program supports academic learning by providing a link between practical career preparation and education. Science and math lessons, in accordance with state educational standards, are developed for middle and high school students. These lessons emphasize real-life educational experiences. The lessons focus on career awareness while supporting education and the transitional goals of the program. Students also learn important sequencing skills working in the garden that carry over to classroom learning. Further, the program supports the development of social skills and self-determination skills. Students learn to work together cooperatively and practice interacting with others when selling the garden produce, sewing products and earthworms. Additionally, the students have the opportunity to identify their interests, recognize their strengths, and evaluate their goals. Opportunities to experience success in both an educational and work setting support the development of a healthy self-esteem. Finally, the program fosters life skill development through budget planning and use of available monies. Thus, the initiatives are integral to the work of both the school counselor in facilitating a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012) and the teacher in teaching academic subjects.

In addition to the program students, the greater school community, including the student body and staff, benefit because the vegetable and worm gardens are visible for the entire school community. Teachers can use the garden as a reference point to educate all students about plant growth and biological systems. The clothing bank provides a service to help meet the basic needs of all students. It also offers the opportunity for increased empathy and the intrinsic satisfaction of helping others through civic involvement. Furthermore, the program promotes a positive atmosphere for growth and development, which may foster excitement about learning. The program, through a focus on a positive, collaborative learning atmosphere, has the potential to nurture excitement about active learning and dedicated participation in one's own learning.

The community also benefits from the program. Most importantly, student success may lead to the future integration of productive citizens into the community. By producing products specifically for the immediate community market, students develop a sense of community ownership and support for the program. Likewise, community partners have the opportunity to expand their workforce without incurring tremendous training expenses, while receiving continued management support from school personnel.

Despite the program benefits, there are also challenges. Program sustainability is an ongoing challenge that has intensified with budget cuts. The program initiatives were initially grant funded; however, the grants did not provide funding for sustainability. To address the challenges, the program formed an advisory board composed of school personnel, students and community partners who defined the priorities of the program, provided oversight, and reported progress to the School Advisory Committee. The board was instrumental in brainstorming and implementing sustainability strategies. At the board's suggestion, students began marketing products grown and created through the program as a way to generate program funds. Another strategy involved obtaining additional grant funding to construct a tool shed, irrigation system and greenhouse. A greenhouse allows for starter plant production and reduces vegetable garden costs. The starter plants, when sold as another program product, generate additional income. Furthermore, the board sought to develop strong collaborations within the community to obtain donations and support. As another way to develop strong community-program collaboration, the board opted to solicit funds from the surrounding community.

Students identified as ESE/EBD, by the nature of their disability, are presented with challenges. While on campus, the program uses the school's behavioral supports and interventions such as point sheets and rewards for appropriate behaviors. In addition, students have opportunities to process their experiences with the school counselor and other staff. These interventions reinforce appropriate pro-social behavior supportive of job skill development and aptitude. Additionally, the point system provides data to measure a student's readiness to transition to an Option 2 diploma, or postgraduation education and/or vocational training (e.g., Job Corp).

Conversely, the supports, rewards, and interventions are different within the community placement sites, creating a challenge for students transitioning to work outside the campus environment. However, students do experience job site support and reinforcement as they "prove" themselves at the worksites. This real-world treatment thus encourages development of transition strategies to use following the completion of high school.

A perennial challenge encompasses obtaining adequate funding to sustain the initiatives. Adequate financial support is needed in order to offer a stipend to students working on campus. This is an incentive for students and supports efforts to adequately prepare them for community work placements. In spite of funding fluctuations, a dedicated effort is made for successful work placement and maintenance of incentives to reward appropriate skill development and job success.

Although the program has experienced challenges and is relatively small (enrolling 10–15 students each year), some preliminary success has been identified within the program. Within the past school year, the program doubled the number of graduates. Additionally, the program had three students re-enroll who had previously withdrawn, one of the three graduating at the end of the school year. No students withdrew from the program during the year, and behavioral referrals were down 50% while students' grade point average (GPA) increased by 0.17 points. Furthermore, students reported that they enjoyed the program and the job training experience. Some students stated that they would have dropped out of school if it were not for the program initiatives. Thus, the program appears to be promising in addressing counseling and academic goals. However, future research is needed to further examine the effectiveness of the program. Future research may include collecting pre/post data, further exploring perceptions (e.g., students, parents, school staff, community employers) about the program, and examining the longitudinal effects of the program.

In conclusion, IDEA (2004) requires schools to create transition plans for students with disabilities; however, Sabbatino and Macrine (2007) emphasize that this is not sufficient to promote a successful transition to adulthood. Therefore, programs are needed to promote the success of students with ESE/EBD. The design and implementation of programs requires collaboration between school counselors, teachers, administrators, support staff, students, families and community stakeholders. Additionally, program implementation requires time, funding and other resources. Despite these challenges, researchers have indicated that focusing on crucial in-school predictors may lead to success following high school (Test et al., 2009). Thus, this article presents a promising program for working with students with ESE/EBD. However, future research is needed to examine the initiatives presented in this article and determine how they might be used to help students become productive citizens.

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