

Connecting Parents to Agencies and Resources Using Non-Traditional Methods



1. Which strategy works best?

No one way works best because like their children, every family is different. Each family has different languages in which to communicate, some have computers and some do not, some are able to attend day and night parent meetings while others are not. Therefore, the obvious is obvious- no one method will reach all parents. It must be a combination of information systems:

a. Information Systems

- Parent Newsletter
- Email Listserv
- Parent Night
- Transition Fairs
- Parent/Teacher Meetings
- Other

b. Strategies That Promote Success

- Develop a list of the above activities with known dates and the information topic for each activity.
- With limited amount of time, parents are more likely to attend an activity if they know the specific information provided and it matches their “information needs.” And, if they know in advance!
- Avoid developing “general sessions” such as employment with information that covers “getting jobs” for students with learning disabilities to intellectual disabilities. Parents at both ends of the spectrum will believe that only a small amount of information will meet their needs. Most parents will not attend a 1-hour or 1½ hour meeting for what they believe will be 15 minutes of information that applies to them. It is not necessary to develop sessions by disability but consider natural groupings such as support needs and eligibility issues.
- Develop sessions by support needs, eligibility issues, and other related characteristics. It is critical to ensure the information reaches the appropriate students and parents. This concept seems difficult for some educators. For example, a parent information night was provided for parents and their students who planned to attend postsecondary education for two and four-year degree programs. The training specifically targeted students who were in inclusion. One high school only passed out the flyers to students served in functional instruction/LIFE Skills classes to take home to their parents. This was not the intended audience.
- Consider developing a targeted information agenda for the year. At each school event, provide an information sheet for parents concerning specific transition topics. Customize the “Transition Hot Topics” for specific groups. For example, September parent night at each school can address Vocational Rehab/DARS and Health and Human Services Information information. While the functional

instruction teacher will provide information on Vocational Rehab/DARS and the Intellectual Disability Services and Mental Health Services departments in the local agencies, the resource/inclusion teachers might provide information on Vocational Rehab/DARS and the Mental Health agency. It is critical for each teacher to know the make-up of his/her class and select applicable information to provide. Inappropriate information given to parents instantly dies a “credibility death”! Below is an example of a teacher’s plan of “Hot Topics” to share with parents during the school year.

Fair Park High School: 2010-2011	
Date	Parent Information Activity
Sept. 19, 2010 Parent Night	Each teacher will provide an overview of the class and specific transition information that may assist your child after high school. The Parent Night transition information will address agencies that provide assistance for college or trade school, employment, and financial assistance for young adults with all types of disabilities.
Annual ARD Meeting <i>(Look at the date on last year’s ARD/IEP papers. The annual ARD meeting for this year will be held prior to that date)</i>	Please plan to arrive for your child’s ARD meeting 15 minutes before the meeting or stay 15 minutes after the meeting. Your child’s teacher will do one of the following activities based on your needs and those of your child. (1) Provide information on the agency application process or (2) assist you in starting and possibly completing the agency application process online.
Parent/Teacher Conference <i>(Will be scheduled by your child’s teacher)</i>	At this year’s parent/teacher conference, the teacher will review your child’s progress and make recommendations. At the end of the conference, the teacher will provide information on financial assistance for adults with disabilities. <i>(While some teachers will provide DARS financial assistance for postsecondary education and job coaching, the functional instruction teacher may also provide information on the Waiver/Interest List)</i>
Feb. 27, 2011 College and Career Night	A variety of colleges and universities from around the United States, including many from Texas, will attend. Each institution will have a table and share information with interested students and their parents. For information concerning supports for adult students with disabilities, you may either ask about disability services at the table or after visiting with the universities, you may go to room 301 for the information. A district Transition Teacher will provide information and answer questions about how to apply for academic and other support for adult students with disabilities and potential financial support. Information varies by postsecondary institutions and student eligibility.
Senior Exit ARDs	Please allow 15 to 30 minutes before or after your child’s senior exit ARD meeting to meet with the Transition Teacher to review the transition status of your child. Specific information will be provided about employment and postsecondary education supports for adult students with disabilities after graduation.

2. Transition Fairs

- a. Traditional transition fairs reach a relatively small percentage of district parents. Of the parent participant group, a percentage of parents come from other school districts resulting in an even smaller representation from the home district. In addition, the number of parents attending each year is often the same ones who attended in previous years. This renders the “positive impact” of the traditional transition Fair as minimal. The message to districts is that the current format is marginally useful and reaches few parents. This does not mean transition fairs do not have a place in the information toolkit, or that it cannot be revised to reach more parents.
- b. First and foremost, the format **MUST** address the needs of parents. What are those needs:
 - i. Convenience
 1. Time and location
 2. Consider adding childcare and dinner, like churches on Wednesday night. Add a small fee if needed for parents who want to attend. Or better yet, ask for small donations from each agency. If you have 20 agencies and organizations with \$50 donations, you will have \$1000 for a spaghetti dinner. Talk to the Chamber of Commerce to request small donations. Businesses are always looking for tax deductible opportunities.
 - ii. Wise use of time
 1. Ensure the agencies and organizations match the postsecondary transition goals of the students. You will need to conduct a folder analysis to do this.
 2. Consider arranging the agency tables differently. Group according to service and consider separate locations. For example, MHIDD and SSI in one location, DARS and postsecondary in a separate location, Vocational Reb/DARS and Texas Workforce in a separate location, etc.
 3. If there is a “kick-off speaker,” keep it generic with a simple welcome and orientation to the service locations.
 - iii. Results
 1. Provide an opportunity for parents to complete service applications and in-take activities.
 - a. Ask agencies with an in-take process to come prepared to provide in-take services.
 - b. Secure the school computer lab and classrooms with computers.
 - c. Place transition teachers/VAC, school counselors, and agency representatives in locations that can become in-take offices.
 - d. Assist parents in going on-line to complete the FAFSA, Waiver List application, MHIDD application, Vocational Rehab/DARS, etc.

- e. As parents learn they will have assistance in navigating the agency systems and actually “get something done,” the word will spread and attendance will increase over time.
- f. Holding the fairs, inviting lots of organizations, and handing out contact information... what has changed over the years? Try another way. If not this one, analyze your transition fair results, parent information needs, and use the three guidelines provided to organize the event (convenience, wise use of time, results).

3. Building Capacity in our Education Partners

- a. In general education, there are appointed positions to connect students with postsecondary activities.
 - Counselors in the Counseling Department
 - Counselors in Career Centers
 - School nurses
 - District and campus 504 Representatives
 - Parent liaisons and social workers
 - Dropout Prevention staff
 - ROTC staff
- b. Train general education partners on transition information to build capacity. This is essential to meet the needs of students with disabilities served primarily in inclusive environments. This group of education partners often possess information special educators do not have. Just like the partnership between special education teachers and general education content teachers has resulted in higher expectations and achievement for students with disability served in inclusive environments, similar results may occur with a partnership between general education and special education transition partners.