



Talking about Transition to High School

A Focus Group Protocol for
Families of Students with Disabilities



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The ICARE Schools study, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), focuses on the families of students with disabilities and their connections with their adolescent's schools. Over a 4 year period, ICARE staff worked closely with middle schools and their families to unpack and describe some of the innovative approaches and strategies used by schools to engage *all* families in the education of students with disabilities. Throughout our previous studies that included Beacons of Excellence, a study of inclusive middle schools, and Good High Schools, a study that examined high-achieving, high-performing inclusive high schools, the family voices, dreams, and aspirations came ringing through all of our interviews, focus groups, and conversations. These conversations became the springboard for a study that focused on family engagement, particularly families from culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse backgrounds.

Early in the study, families talked about the important issues and concerns that they had for their children. Issues such as having friends, dating, and homework were topics that arose during family focus groups. Going to high school, driving cars, and dating, all common teenage experiences, loomed over the horizon for these families, and these concerns were magnified by the child's disability. Transition to high school became a topic of high interest to our families, and research reinforces their concerns in that "students' experiences in their first year of high school often determine their success throughout high school and beyond" (National High School Center (2007) 'The first year of high school: A quick stats fact sheet. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from <http://www.betterhighschools.org>).

More and more school systems are focusing on how to transition their incoming students into their schools by conducting summer activities, transition camps, and family information sessions. However, for students with disabilities, this is even more important. Many of these students have had the support of a smaller, safe environment in middle school with systematic communications between home and school. The family involvement with these students cannot be overlooked. Often, it is this involvement that has allowed students to experience success. It is, therefore, important for schools to recognize they are not just transitioning students to the high school, but they must also communicate and plan with the families around the unique experiences and concerns they have for their child with a disability.

This ICARE Family Focus Group Protocol was used by the ICARE School Study to engage families of middle-grades students with disabilities in a discussion of transition to high school. High school staff attended the session in order to listen and learn.



Introduction

Overview

This group protocol can be used as a tool by either a parent group or school staff to discuss the unique issues of transition to high school that students with disabilities and their families face.

Goal

The first goal of this protocol is to provide a forum for families of children with disabilities to express their concerns, raise questions, and discuss issues about their child's unique transition needs to high school.

The second goal of this protocol is for high school personnel to listen carefully to the family concerns and guide them to relevant contacts and resources.

Objectives

Families will:

- Have the opportunity to identify their unique concerns
- Be listened to

School personnel will:

- Respond with the appropriate resources or contacts
- Identify possible additional issues at the school or supports that will be needed before children transition

Facilitation and Process Guidelines

Ensure Neutral Facilitation: One or two facilitators are suggested. These persons should be neutral and sensitive to the families' concerns as well as the schools. It should not be facilitated by personnel from either the high school or the middle school. The facilitator could be someone with a relationship with families such as a family liaison, district person, guidance counselor or social worker. The role of middle or high school personnel in this discussion is to listen and provide information after family concerns are on the table.

The transition protocol is designed with the following norms.

Facilitators note:

- Family Centered - The discussion is centered on family concerns for their children.
 - It is NOT an orientation to the high school but a chance to address the families' needs and concerns.
 - This meeting should not include the students who are transitioning. It is for adult members of the family.
- Make Connections - Middle school personnel are helping families to make face-to-face connections with people at the high school.
- Honor Linguistic Diversity - Have persons available to translate OR hold a separate meeting for parents who speak languages other than English and hold the meeting in that language.
- Ensure contributions from all participants.
- Ensure Comfort - Meet in a familiar setting where families are comfortable. In the ICARE research, the meetings were hosted at the middle school—a place that the families were already familiar with, thus providing a comfortable environment where they feel free to speak honestly.

Preparation

Recruitment:

- The meetings are to be attended by families of students with disabilities who would be transitioning to high school in the fall.
- It will be important to follow up with certain people: Call targeted families (i.e. those who would enrich the conversation OR those who typically do not read school flyers).
- Recruit two knowledgeable high school representatives. Each person should expect to listen carefully to family concerns. They should also have knowledge of programming and case management at the high school. These persons will be able to provide information in response to family concerns. Their role is to make connections at the end of the session.

Location:

A familiar and comfortable location with a room big enough for people to sit in a circle

Time:

This meeting is designed to take 2 hours. Allow for 1 – 1^{1/2} hours for focus group discussion and time before and after for greeting and networking.

Supplies:

- Blank Chart paper
- Markers
- Prepared charts: see examples in manual
- High School personnel should be prepared with business cards or other contact information
- Plan to provide cookies or coffee to create a welcoming atmosphere for families
- Name tags

Protocol Overview

Section	Overview	Goal	Facilitator role	High school personnel role	Supplies	Time
Step I: Begin the Session	Set the tone of the meeting and build a sense of community in the group	Establish trust and family centered focus	Introduce self and the goal of the discussion. Have families introduce themselves	Listen and take notes	none	5-10 min.
Step II: Listen to Family Concerns	Brainstorms family concerns about the transition to high school.	To elicit families' unique concerns about their child's transition to high school	Elicit comments and write them on the chart paper. Ask clarifying questions Ensure all everyone gets to participate.	Listen and take notes	Blank chart paper and markers	15-20 min.
Step 3: Discuss Common Family Concerns	Provides and opportunity to compare family concerns with the concerns of families from other schools and focus groups.	To allow families to see that their concerns are commonly felt by other families of students who have disabilities.	Provide a list of common concerns Elicit comments from the group	Listen and take notes	Pre-made chart #1: Concerns from Previous Focus Groups	1-2 min.

Protocol Overview (continued)

Section	Overview	Goal	Facilitator role	High school personnel role	Supplies	Time
Step 4: Discuss Actual Experiences	To discuss issues that truly were problematic for children when they transitioned to high school.	To relate what the real issues were for most children in their transition to high school.	Show common issues and point out the concerns that really were issues and the concerns that were not.	Listen and take notes	Pre-made Chart #2: What Really Happened	15 min.
Step 5: Hear advice from Other Families	This section provides advice to families from other parents whose children have already transitioned to high school.	Help define the important actions that parents can take to assist their child's transition.	Discuss each of the advice points and discuss who families or parents might need to know at the high school to take action.	Listen unless asked for information	Pre-made Chart #3	15 min.
Step 6: Close the Session	This final section provides a chance to informally connect families and high school personnel. The discussion will be general but it allows families to discuss their concerns and receive targeted information from high school personnel.	To provide parents with concrete information or help they need in order to make the transition to high school smooth for their child.	Discuss each of the points and make sure there is an answer for how parents can address the concern at the high school.	Provide information about the high school and the appropriate contacts and resources to the family/parent concerns.	Chart paper and marker	15 min.



Step 1: Begin the Session

Overview

This section helps set the tone of the meeting and build a sense of community in the group

Goal

Establish trust and family centered focus

Supplies

None

Facilitator role and actions

Introduce self and the goal of the discussion. Have families introduce themselves.

High school personnel role

Listen and take notes

Time

5-10 minutes

Sample Opening

“ We are here this evening to discuss the transition from middle school to high school. Our goal tonight is to hear your concerns, discuss some of these issues in general and to provide you with some information that will:

1. Prepare you with information to help your child transition to high school.
2. Give the high school personnel here this evening a better understanding of your concerns for your children and the supports you might need as parents.

However, before we do that, I would like to take a moment to introduce ourselves...Why don't we go around and each introduce ourselves and say one thing you like about the school or something about your child...

”



Step 2: Listen to Family Concerns

Overview

This section brainstorms family concerns about the transition to high school.

Goal

To elicit families' unique concerns about their child's transition to high school

Supplies

Blank chart paper and markers

Facilitator role and actions

Facilitate family comments and write them on the chart paper. Ask clarifying questions when necessary. Ensure everyone gets to participate.

High school personnel role

Listen and take notes

Time

15-20 minutes

Sample Opening

“ All of you are concerned about the transition of your kids. We have a whole list of concerns that other people came up with... However, before we show you their concerns... what are your concerns about your children starting high school? ”

Write these on the chart paper. (see Sample Concerns below)

This is an opportunity for their unique concerns to be put on the table. However, if conversation only covers certain topics (i.e. social concerns), probe with questions to make sure most example topics are covered (i.e. academic concerns). Below are some examples.

Sample Chart

Your Concerns

- Getting lost in the system
- Who are the “team” at the high school?
- Will child feel part of the high school?
- Getting lost (building size)
- Socialization: Will they be picked on? Will they be isolated? They are blossoming now, will it continue?
- How will I know if they are doing well in class? Will we get support?
How do I communicate with the teachers?
- If I “release” child or step back will any one support them?
- The middle school “team approach”
 - May not be duplicated
 - What’s at high school?
- Opposite sex relationships
- Where is the familiar face?



Step 3: Discuss Common Family Concerns

Overview

This section provides an opportunity to compare family concerns with the concerns of families from other schools and focus groups.

Goal

To allow families to see that their concerns are commonly felt by other families of students who have disabilities.

Supplies

Pre-made chart #1: Concerns from Previous Focus Groups

Facilitator role and actions

Provide a list of common concerns and elicit comments from the group

High school personnel role

Listen and take notes

Time

1-2 minutes

Sample Opening

“ OK – would you like to see how your list compares with the list of others families? ”

Sample Chart

Concerns from Previous Focus Groups

- Homework
- Fear of children getting lost in the building
- Fear of children getting lost in the system
- Social concerns: dating, sex, driving, being shunned
- Will they be able to handle the work?
- How do families interact with the system at the high school?



Step 4: Discuss Actual Experiences

Overview

This section provides discussion about the reality of other families who have already been through the transition to high school with their child. We recommend discussing with families whose children are already at the high school what they found the true transition stumbling blocks to be. However, we have included elements that were issues for students in the ICARE Schools study for reference.

Goal

To relate what the real issues were for most children in their transition to high school.

Supplies

Pre-made Chart #2: What Really Happened? (use information from your discussion with families whose children are already at the high school, or use the sample opening below).

Facilitator role and actions

Show common issues and point out the concerns that really were issues and the concerns that were not.

High school personnel role

Listen and take notes

Time

15 minutes

Sample Opening

“ Let’s look at what other families found. Homework tended not to be the big issue. The kids did get lost but not after the first week or two. The expectation that this would happen was there, but there were people who would help them. This was not as much a concern. The real troubles were:

- Kids that were lost in the system were those who would not ask for help at home or at school
- Kids that couldn’t open their lockers- they found a solution
 - Gave up and shared best friends locker
 - Got a key for the locker
 - Left locker open all the time
- The deadly trio...Dating, Sex and Driving were not really issues. They are going to be issues soon (i.e. 10th grade), however it seemed that most 9th graders still traveled in groups...

”



Step 5: Hear Advice from Other Families

Overview

This section provides advice to families from others whose children have already transitioned to high school.

Goal

Help define the important actions that families can take to assist their child's transition

Supplies

Pre-made Chart #3: Advice from Other Families

Facilitator role and actions

Discuss each of the points and who families need to know at the high school to do this

High school personnel role

Listen unless asked for information

Time

15 minutes

Sample Opening

“

These same families offered advice to you based on their experiences.

”

Sample Chart

Advice from Other Families

- Ask for help right away
- Get to know support team right away
- Work on class selection with your child
- If child insists on a particular class let them try
- Alert team if child does not talk to you



Step 6: Close the Session

Overview

This section provides a chance to informally connect families and high school personnel. The discussion will be general but it allows people to discuss their concerns, and receive targeted information from high school personnel.

Goal

To provide families with information or help they need in order to smooth the transition to high school for their child.

Supplies

Chart paper and marker

Facilitator role and actions

Discuss each of the points and make sure there is an answer for how families can address the concern at the high school

High school personnel role

Provide information about the high school and the appropriate contacts and resources for families

Time: 15 minutes

Sample Opening

“ We kind of wanted to give you a chance...like in Ghost Busters... to ask about who you might call for your issues... The high school folks are present and can give you an idea of who to call. So...let's look at the list of concerns we have drafted and see who you WOULD CALL...”

Sample Chart

Who You Gonna Call?

If you need help...

Connecting in school or transitioning

Checking on homework, grades, teachers

Having problems at home or in school

Big Little Things (Can't open locker, getting lost daily)

Planning for College

Planning for career or community living

Peer support, too many periods/transitions

Other family concerns....

When will we find out who the case manager is?

How to keep kids from getting lost in the system?



Sample Letter to Families

Date

Dear Parent or Guardian,

The _____ School will be hosting a focus group for families of students receiving special education services who will be moving on to the high school in the fall. The staff at _____ Middle School would like to better understand what families have to say on this issue.

We will use a protocol developed at Education Development Center, Inc., (EDC) a non-profit educational research organization located in Newton, Massachusetts. The protocol is a result of a national study titled: *ICARE Schools: Meaningful Engagement of Families in the IEP Process*. This project was funded by the Office of Special Education under the US Department of Education. The project's work includes the creation and delivery of a Tool Kit for schools to use to develop and maintain meaningful partnerships with families in the IEP process.

Focus groups of families whose children receive special education services will be held on _____. These focus groups will be an opportunity to discuss the practices that are working as well as issues in the transition process. These conversations will be confidential. No names or identifying information will be used in the reporting of the results. The themes that emerge from these conversations will be shared with the staff at _____ Middle School, _____ High School and district personnel.

- On *(Insert date)* from *(Insert time)* there will be a group for families of eighth graders whose children will be making the transition to high school this spring.

Thank you for your participation, and if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact us.

(Insert name and contact information)

Resources for Families and Educators

YES Familyeducation.com

<http://www.familyeducation.com/home/>

This web site provides a variety of resources for all parents. The site is divided into grade levels and categories (school, entertainment, and life) and covers topics from nutrition to educational software. The school section provides specific tips on helping with homework. Additionally, parents will find a section titled “Special Needs” which features links to a variety of toolkits and games to help build academic skills, answers to frequently asked questions, and other supports for special learners.

Exceptional Parent Magazine

<http://www.eparent.com/>

This magazine is written specifically for parent of children with disabilities. On the website, parents can search through archived articles and send in questions. It offers advice on education, life planning, health care, and other issues related to parenting exceptional children. It features a search function to find products and services, such as medical beds or camps. The education section features information on IEPs, IDEA, school accommodations, and assistive technology.

Learning Disabilities Online

<http://www.ldonline.org/>

This easy-to-navigate site offers support for teachers, parents, and kids with learning disabilities. It includes detailed information about many learning disabilities, recent news headlines related to learning disabilities, as well as an overview of IDEA. It also offers several interactive features including a free confidential question and answer service, active bulletin boards, and a yellow pages directory of service professionals, products, and schools. The parent section is divided into categories such as social skills, parents’ rights, and help with school. It features articles, toolkits, and other resources. The teacher section offers research articles, teaching strategies, and resources for working with students with disabilities.

Schwab Learning

<http://www.schwablearning.org/>

This user-friendly site was designed to create a virtual support system for parents of students with learning disabilities. The site is divided into section to help parents identify learning disabilities, manage issues, and connect with other parents and support networks. For example, the identification section includes articles about psychoeducational testing. The managing section offers descriptions of assistive technologies. The site also features parent-to- parent message boards and a resource section with links to relevant articles, organizations, and services

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)

<http://www.pacer.org/>

PACER is a national center that provides assistance to families and professionals advocating for a free and appropriate education for all children. Their website offers many resources including a large number of their own publications, information about parent advocacy training, links to related organizations, and links to state parent centers.

Council for Exceptional Children

<http://www.cec.sped.org//AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>

This website is aimed at educators. It is the largest international organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities, students with disabilities, and/or the gifted. CEC advocates for positive special education policies, and the site offers a comprehensive section to support advocates. The site also offers a variety of professional development supports including a job bank for special education professionals looking for work, online forums, national conventions, and online professional development workshops. Additional features

are a news section with national and international headlines, a book store, and links to many CEC publications. From this site you can also connect to state CEC chapters which offer their own publications, resources, and events.

Inclusive Schools Network

The Inclusive Schools Network (ISN) is a web-based resource for families, schools and communities that promotes inclusive educational practices. This resource has grown out of Inclusive Schools Week™, an internationally-recognized annual event sponsored by Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC). ISN's mission is "to encourage, embolden and empower people to design and implement effective inclusive schools, by sharing insights and best practices and by providing opportunities for connection." ISN will provide year-round opportunities for educators and families around the world to network, share resources, and build their knowledge of inclusive education. Visit us online at: www.inclusiveschools.org

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY)

<http://www.nichcy.org/>

This site provides information about all aspects of learning disabilities for professionals and parents. It includes specific information about particular learning disabilities, information about IDEA and NCLB, and a research section that focuses on effective instructional practices.

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt)

<http://www.nccrest.org/>

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt), a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Special Educations Programs, provides technical assistance and professional development to close the achievement gap between students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their peers, and reduce inappropriate referrals to special education. The site includes professional development opportunities and practitioner briefs.

Beacons of Excellence Study

Morocco, C. C., Brigham, N., & Aguilar, C. M. (2006). *Visionary Middle Schools: Signature Practices and the Power of Local Invention*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Good High Schools Study

Morocco, C. C. and Zimond, N., Eds. (2006) Special Series: Good High Schools for Students with Disabilities, *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 21(3), 135-190.



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