

Introduction to Working With Families and Community Agencies to Support Students With Special Needs

Fred, a 1991 high school graduate, was born with developmental disabilities. There were no early childhood special education (ECSE) services in the early 1970s, but Fred's mother found a teacher who was willing to provide him with preschool enrichment two hours a day, three days a week. Fred attended self-contained special education classes during his school years but attended general education art and physical education classes. He also attended some vocational classes.

Transition planning for Fred began two years before he was to leave high school. At that time, he had a county developmental disability social worker and a counselor from the state department of vocational rehabilitation services. Fred spent part of each school day at the county technical college, working on vocational skills in the technical center. Fred received training in the food industry career program where he learned about food preparation, busing, dishwashing, and cleaning. This career program helped provide Fred with the background necessary to find a job in his community.

As Fred's story illustrates, disabilities do not start and end when students enter and leave school. Besides, students with disabilities spend only about 20 percent of a 24-hour day in

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school. If these statements were not true, we may not need to write this book. We'd assume that what students learn is a function of what we do for them in school. Instead, in this book, we address two of the most exciting parts of working with students with disabilities:

Life stage issues (early intervention and transition)

Collaboration (working with families and professionals)

In short, we talk about aspects of the larger context of students' lives outside school and how these aspects interact with and influence instruction. If you are going to be a teacher, you will have to consider early intervention, transition, working with families, and working with the broader educational community.

EARLY INTERVENTION

Educators and developmental psychologists recognize the importance of early development and early experience to later life success. In the first part of this book, we describe interventions early in children's lives intended to prevent later school difficulties. We address the importance of such early intervention, especially in light of the major demographic changes taking place in society.

PLANNING FOR TRANSITION

In an age in which Americans plan everything, it is not surprising that major consideration is being given to the transition children undergo from home to school and the transition of adolescents with disabilities from school to work. Much consideration is given to the skills that will enable students with disabilities to get jobs, to function in society, and generally to improve the quality of their lives. In the second part of this book we address the many transitions that students with disabilities must make during their lives.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Family involvement is not only a legal imperative, but it also makes sense. Over the past 20 years or so, educators have talked a great deal about empowering families and involving them in their children's educational programs. Recently, major efforts have been undertaken to make this happen. We devote a section of this book to involving families and considerations in working with them.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Schools and school personnel cannot meet all of the challenges now confronting them without close working relationships with business and community leaders and personnel from community agencies and services. This book describes current efforts to work in a collaborative manner to meet the concerns and challenges of the day.