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Implementing CIRCLES: A new model for interagency collaboration in transition planning

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Abstract.
BACKGROUND: Transition planning services for students with disabilities are mandated by IDEA 2004, but getting all the right folks to the table to plan for this transition is difficult to accomplish.
OBJECTIVE: CIRCLES is a new model for interagency collaboration in transition planning. It includes three levels of teams, working together to identify specific post-school goals for students with disabilities, and developing a series of steps to help each student achieve them.
METHODS: This study utilized focus groups of key members of the different levels of teams involved to identify successes and challenges in the first year of implementation of this new model.
RESULTS: The CIRCLES model of service delivery improved agency members' sense of collaboration and awareness of services available in their districts.
CONCLUSIONS: Although more research is needed, CIRCLES as a service delivery model increases interagency collaboration for transition planning for students with disabilities.

Keywords: Transition, transition planning, youth with disabilities, interagency collaboration

1. Introduction

Special Education services are intended to provide individualized support to students with disabilities as they work their way through the education system; one way to measure the success of these services is by evaluating the post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Currently, post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities are measured by level of engagement in three areas: (a) postsecondary education or training,

(b) employment, and (c) if necessary, independent living (US Department of Education, 2004). The transition from the special education system to this adult world of work, postsecondary education, and independent living is critical to the post-school success of youth with disabilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires a written plan outlining services and activities for transitioning youth with disabilities from high school to adult life be included in the individualized education program (IEP) no later than the student's 16th birthday. IDEA 2004 defines transition as a coordinated set of activities that facilitate the child's movement from high school to adult life and address

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areas of: training, education, employment, community integration, adult services, and independent living. IDEA 2004 further dictates the transition planning process should be based on the child's individual strengths and needs, and should include representatives from any agency likely to provide adult services to the student during or after transitioning out of school. Each student's post-school goals serve as a road map – we need to know where the student is going if we are going to plan how to get there. Consequently, post-school goals should be written prior to developing the remainder of the IEP, to ensure academic experiences can support both the educational goals and post-school goals of students with disabilities. IDEA (2004) further requires schools "must invite to the IEP meeting a representative of any participating agency that is likely to be responsible for providing or paying for transition services" [34 CFR §300.321(b)(3)]. Inviting agencies to the IEP does not let schools off the hook for agreed-upon services. In the event that a given agency fails to provide services promised, the school must "reconvene the IEP meeting and identify alternative strategies to meet the transition objectives" [34 CFR §300.324(c)(1)]. It is clear, then, that IDEA requires adult service provider involvement in planning and providing transition services, and that the school is ultimately responsible for following up and ensuring all services deemed necessary are provided.

Interagency collaboration is defined here as a process through which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; agency representatives come together to achieve, collectively, more than they could each achieve working independently. Bruner (1991) defines collaboration as:

... a process to reach goals that cannot be achieved acting singly (or, at a minimum, cannot be reached as efficiently). As a process collaboration is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The desired end is more comprehensive and appropriate services for families that improve family outcomes. (Bruner, 1991)

Interagency collaboration has been identified as an evidence-based predictor of improved education and employment outcomes for students with disabilities (Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009), and is considered a substantiated transition practice (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010; Kohler, 1993). However, few models exist for schools to use to increase interagency collaboration.

The purpose of this article is to describe the current practice for involving outside service providers in the transition process and introduce a new service delivery model for encouraging interagency collaboration and providing transition services to achieve the highest post-school outcomes possible. This new model is

called *Communicating Interagency Relationships and Collaborative Linkages for Exceptional Students* (CIR-CLES). The data reported herein are part of an ongoing formative program evaluation of the CIRCLES model of service delivery. We will review current research on interagency collaboration and describe implementation of the CIRCLES model. Finally, we review focus group data from agency stakeholders and make recommendations moving forward.

1.1. Collaboration research

In addition to federal legislation requiring agency involvement in the transition planning process, research on best practices supports interagency collaboration as a service delivery model for transition planning. Interagency collaboration has been defined as "a broad concept that encompasses formal and informal relationships between schools and adult agencies in which resources are shared to achieve common transition goals" (Noonan, Morningstar, & Erickson, 2008). Test, Fowler, White, Richter, and Walker (2009) described interagency collaboration as a "collaborative service delivery system to involve community agencies, businesses, and organizations" (p. 24). Noonan, McCall, Zheng, and Gaumer Erickson (2012), investigated the level of collaboration and the extent to which collaboration capacities and strategies affected change in collaboration levels for a successful state level interagency collaboration team. The found positive characteristics of interagency capacity to include: (a) relationship building within team, (b) encouraging members from a variety of organizations to participate, (c) a commitment to time for meetings and projects, and (d) a sense of cooperative leadership. Collaborative strategies which affected team collaboration included mutual training and information sharing across agencies, knowledge of each agency through site visits, and designing and participating in group projects.

As early as 1995, Bullis, Davis, Bull, and Johnson found students who received assistance from 3 to 6 adult service providers were more likely to be engaged in post-school employment or education than students who only received assistance from 0 to 2 providers. Repetto, Webb, Garvan, and Washington (2002) also found interagency collaboration for students with disabilities in high school was positively correlated with post-school educational success. In a study examining effective practices for developing interagency collaboration, Noonan, Morningstar, and Erickson (2008) described interagency collaboration as a critical link to

both post-school employment and postsecondary education for students with disabilities. Additionally, Test, Fowler, White, et al. (2009) found interagency collaboration to be an evidence-based transition practice for increasing school completion.

In a review of literature examining effective vocational rehabilitation services, Fleming, Del Valle, Kim, and Leahy (2012) reviewed 10 studies using interagency collaboration, and noted it was one of the most often used best practices; they highlighted the ability to reallocate funds, learn from other team members, and share resources as some of the advantages. Test, Mazzotti, et al. (2009), in a systematic review of correlational studies examining secondary transition predictors from 1984 to 2009, found interagency collaboration was an evidence-based predictor of post-school success in both education and employment for students with disabilities. More recently, interagency collaboration has been identified as part of an effective transition plan for students with autism spectrum disorders (Lee & Carter, 2012; Roberts, 2010); while Balcazar, Taylor-Ritzler, and Dimfl (2012) showed increased enrollment in postsecondary education using an interagency collaboration model for students from low-income minority backgrounds. With the dearth of published research on effective interagency collaboration interventions, the Council of Exceptional Children's Division of Career Development and Transition has released a position paper on evidence-based practices and predictors for successful transition. This paper calls for the need of future research to promote interagency collaboration interventions in schools and districts (Mazzotti, Rowe, Cameto, Test, & Morningstar, 2013). This sentiment for increased research in the area of interagency collaboration is echoed by other researchers focusing on students with disabilities (Shaw & Dukes, 2013; Test, Fowler, Richter, et al., 2009; Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009), postsecondary education for students with severe disabilities (Grigal et al., 2011) and autism (Lee & Carter, 2012; Roberts, 2010), as well as rehabilitation counselors (Oertle, Plotner, & Trach, 2013).

Interagency collaboration is not only federally mandated, it is a research-based practice, supported by over a decade of findings. It is essential to bring the right agencies to the table during the transition planning phase, and to enable these agencies to collaborate to deliver services in order to ensure the best possible post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. In order to understand what makes CIRCLES different, we must first discuss the current model of agency involvement in transition planning.

1.2. Current model of service delivery in transition – catch as catch can

In many school districts, the current practice for getting agency involvement in the transition planning process is for the special education teacher to invite, via telephone or email, every different agency representative to each individual IEP meeting. Depending on the size of the caseload for a given special education teacher, this can mean hundreds to thousands of phone calls and emails a year, merely in the attempt to get agency representatives to show up. For agency representatives who could provide transition services, it is frequently impossible to attend all of the IEP meetings for all potential clients within their service area. If agency representatives are able to attend, this can mean sitting through hours of IEP meetings about educational planning, which, although interesting, often has little bearing on services they are able to provide. Furthermore, agencies often are unable to attend the entire IEP meeting, resulting in IEP meetings being segmented according to when agency representatives can show up, disrupting the flow and preventing the transition component from being crafted at the beginning and guiding the development of the IEP. Additionally, the special education teacher often only contacts those agencies with whom she or he is familiar and those s/he feels are likely to attend. As a result, current model of interagency collaboration in transition planning is exhausting and inefficient at best, and ineffective and *anti*-collaborative at worst.

1.3. CIRCLES, a new model of service delivery

The CIRCLES Project was made possible by a grant from the Institute for Education Sciences as part of this grant, a multi-method research study is currently comparing the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities who receive services through this new model of service delivery with the outcomes for students who received services through the standard model. CIRCLES makes the work of both school and agency staff more effective and efficient. The CIRCLES model is based upon the conceptual model pictured in Fig. 1. CIRCLES is based on a general theory of change built on collaboration theory (Wood & Gray, 1991) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 2004). The logic is that when interagency collaboration occurs in partnership with teaching, students self -determination skills, student involvement

in school level and IEP team meetings will increase, which leads to improved in-school and post-school outcomes.

In the CIRCLES model of service delivery, this theory of change occurs across three team levels and each team serves a specific purpose. The three teams are the Community Level Team, School-Level Team, and IEP Team. The activities of each team and their relationships to one another are illustrated in Fig. 2 and described below.

1.3.1. Community level team

The overarching Community Level Team (CLT) is comprised of administrators and supervisors of each of the adult service providers and outside agencies that might be able to provide support for transition from high school to adult life. This team could include: Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Social Services, Health Department, The Arc, Easter Seals, Autism Society, residential service providers, and any other service providers in the area. The CLT is organized
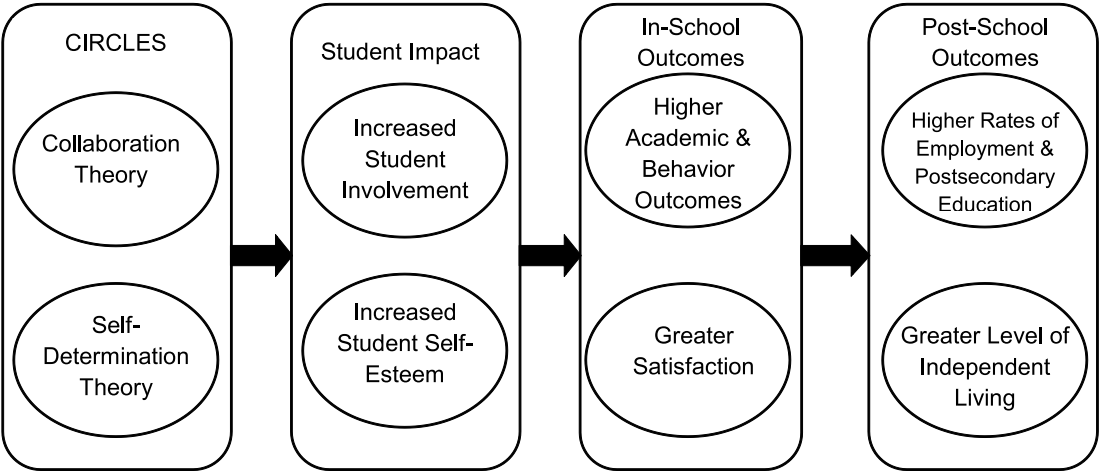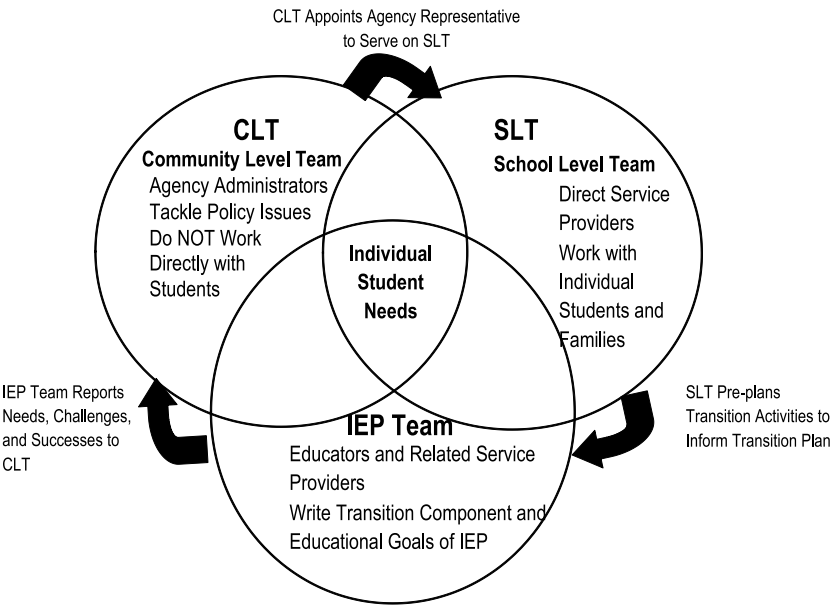

Fig. 1. CIRCLES theory of change.

Fig. 2. CIRCLES.

and convened by district-level school staff (e.g., special education director, program coordinator, transition specialist). These administrators meet two to four times per year and work on issues at the policy level; they identify gaps and overlaps in services, and work together to change policy and practice to better serve students with disabilities. The CLT works to identify and address areas of need in their community; this can result in changes in policies, services, budget allocations, or it can take the form of community outreach and education. One of the key roles of members of the CLT is to appoint a direct service representative from their agencies to serve on the School-Level Team; this administrative-level buy in is vital for the success of the process.

1.3.2. School Level Team

The School-Level Team (SLT) is what makes CIRCLES different than other models that utilize community transition teams. The SLT is comprised of direct service providers (case managers, counselors, care coordinators, etc.) from each agency represented on the CLT. The SLT members are the people special education teachers would traditionally call or email with invitations to IEP meetings in the current model described above. Instead of inviting these representatives to attend each IEP meeting, district-level school staff invite them to attend one meeting a month (during the school year), in which they see multiple students and solely address post-school goals in the areas of transition, specifically: postsecondary education or training, employment, and independent living. Special education teachers prepare their students, individually, to present information about themselves including their goals and needs to SLT members. Students come in, one at a time, and use technology (e.g., PowerPoint, Voki, Wobook, GoAnimate) to describe their strengths, areas of need, and post-school goals. Student presentations typically take less than five minutes. For the remaining time (20– 40 minutes), members of the SLT talk with the student, his or her family, special education teacher, and one another to determine the best way to deliver transition services to each student. In addition to giving the student, parent, and special education teacher a personal contact to associate with each agency, the SLT format also allows for appointments to be made and questions to be answered by the agency members. Families can also discuss any general needs the family may have as a whole. Agencies negotiate with one another about who will provide which services in order to create the most comprehensive plan to meet the majority of the needs of the student and his or her family. Because the SLT's

main purpose is to help develop transition goals and services for the student with the disability, the minutes of the SLT meeting go back to the IEP team with the special education teacher, the student, and his or her parents.

1.3.3. IEP team

The IEP team is the final level in the CIRCLES multi-level approach. After the SLT meeting, teachers take the minutes and decisions made at the SLT back to the IEP meeting and write the transition component based on the services agreed upon at the SLT. This process enables the IEP team to write the other components of the IEP with the end goals of the student in mind. Because the district level school staff are responsible for convening the CLT and SLT meetings, the time special education teachers would typically spend inviting folks to IEP meetings is freed up and they are able to utilize that time for preparing students for SLT and IEP meetings. The assessments and interviews with students that go into developing their presentations to the SLT are all part of standard operating procedures for preparing for the transition component of any IEP meeting. The only activity that may not be part of standard procedures is the presentation of the technology tools to help students present. However, since many districts are requiring students to present a portfolio their senior year, and many of these can use the students' SLT presentations as a starting point for this larger portfolio presentation. In some schools, teachers use the technology their students use as part of CIRCLES as "technology instruction" needed to meet criteria associated with graduation.

1.4. Description of project and recruitment

The model of service delivery used in CIRCLES was developed 20 years ago in a rural county in North Carolina and has been used successfully during that time; results from this one county implementation have been previously published under the name TASSEL (Aspel, Bettis, Quinn, Wood, & Test, 1999). Graduates from the TASSEL program who left school in 1995, 1996, and 1997 experienced positive post school outcomes: (a) 70% reported being employed since leaving school, and (b) 33% reported enrolling in post-secondary education programs (Aspel, Bettis, Test, & Wood, 1998). The founder of CIRCLES collaborated with researchers at a state university to develop a grant for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The current study and CIRCLES implementation is funded by a four-year Goal 3 grant from IES. The research study involves a total of

48 high schools in 15 counties/districts, in two different states. Of these 48 high schools, 24 have begun the CIRCLES model for transition planning, and 24 will continue business as usual until year four, when they will be trained in the CIRCLES method. Due to the random assignment of these schools to either the intervention (experimental) or the business as usual (control setting), only 12 of the 15 districts have schools in the intervention condition. At the time of this writing, we are halfway through our third year of implementation, all participating districts have been trained in the model and each intervention school has held a School Level Team meeting.

1.4.1. Sample recruitment and assignment

We recruited schools by sending a letter (via email) to special education directors and transition coordinators of 38 districts in North and South Carolina, requesting that they contact us if interested. The grant criteria required only that participants be public schools, and that they not be special purpose or self-contained schools. Our final pool of participants included 48 high schools from 15 districts/counties in North and South Carolina. Each school was then randomly assigned into either the intervention (experimental) or the business-as-usual (control) condition using a computer program to generate the random assignment, resulting in 24 schools for each condition. The schools in the experimental condition received training on the implementation of CIRCLES in years one and two, and significant technical assistance and support with implementation in year two. In year four, the remaining 24 schools will be trained in the CIRCLES method of service delivery. We are collecting data on in school achievement, in-school problem behavior, self-determination, and post-school outcomes, along with social validity data, consumer satisfaction, and interagency collaboration data (see Table 1).

1.4.2. Focus groups

In order to train 24 schools in the intervention condition, we devised a staggered start plan, wherein we trained the three districts closest to us in September of year one, a bulk of districts in February, and the remaining districts in September of year two. This staggered start enabled us to fine tune our training and technical assistance with the districts in the closest proximity before taking everything to scale of our study. As a result, the first three districts experienced almost a full school year of intervention prior to the

training of the last districts to enter the study. Table 2 illustrates the post-school outcomes data from 2012 for the first two districts, and from 2010 (most recent available) for the third district. These data must be carefully interpreted when considering CIRCLES, because not all students who receive special education services will be brought to CIRCLES. In fact, CIRCLES targets students with lower levels of academic and social functioning, with the highest levels of need. However, any student with a disability who experiences need for involvement from multiple agencies in order to achieve a successful transition to adult life may be brought to CIRCLES.

As part of our initial, and formative, project evaluation efforts, we conducted focus groups with agency and district personnel from each of these three districts at the end of the first school year. We did not invite students or parents to these groups due to the newness of CIRCLES and the fairly low numbers of students who went through CIRCLES across each district in year one. We chose focus groups to facilitate our data collection by encouraging discussion between key stakeholders about the process of implementing CIRCLES because we believed that these discussions would yield richer data than individual interviews alone (Morgan, 1996).

2. Method

We invited district personnel responsible for convening CLT and SLT meetings and any agency personnel who served on either team to attend two hour focus groups in each district. We had an average of 10 participants per focus group, for a total of 30 participants across all three meetings. Thirty of 37 potential participants attended these focus groups; those who did not attend included seven agency representatives who were unable to attend: Three from the first district, four from the second and none from the third. The first three districts were relatively rural districts, and as a result, many of their agency representatives served on both the SLT and the CLT. These focus groups were facilitated by the first and second authors, and audio recorded. The audio recordings were then transcribed into text. The questions we used to guide these group discussions appear in Table 3.

2.1. Data analysis

Immediately after each focus group, the facilitators wrote field notes, identifying themes found to be

Table 1
CIRCLES data by domain, measures, and collection

Domain of Interest	Measures	About Whom?	Who Collects?	When Collected?
In-School Achievement				
Student GPA	GPA calculated by PowerSchool	Individual Student	School Personnel	Annually, June
NC End of Course (EOC) Scores and Achievement level	North Carolina EOC Tests	Individual Student	School Personnel	Annually, June
Dropout Rate	NC Definition of "Dropout: per SPP/APR Indicator 2"	School-wide/ All Students of Interest	School Personnel	Annually, June
Graduation Rate	# of students graduating with: • Regular diploma • Certificate of Achievement or • Graduation Certificate SPP/APR Indicator 1	School-Wide/All Students of Interest	School Personnel	Annually, June
On-Track Status	% of students • Failing one or more core subjects or • Accumulating fewer credits than the number required for promotion in their grade level	School-Wide/All Student of Interest	School Personnel	Annually, June
In-School Problem Behavior	% of: • Student suspensions • Student Absences • Office discipline referrals	Whole School	School Personnel	Annually, June
In-School Self-Determination				
Students' Level of Participation in IEP Meetings	IEP Participation Measure: 1. Did the student lead the IEP meeting? 2. Rate level of participation (0 = none, 5 = full)	Individual Students	Special Education Teacher	Immediately after IEP meeting
Self-Determination	AIR Self Determination Scales	Individual Students	Student and Special Education Teacher	Annually, April
Students' Level of Participation in School Level Team Meetings	SLT Participation Measure: 1. Did the student lead the SLT meeting? 2. Rate level of participation (0 = none, 5 = full)	Individual Students	Every member of the SLT meeting	At each SLT meeting

Table 1
(Continued)

Domain of Interest	Measures	About Whom?	Who Collects?	When Collected?
Post-School Outcomes				
NC's Indicator 14 Data	% of students no longer in school, had IEPs in effect when they left and, within one year of leaving, were: 1. Enrolled in higher ed 2. Enrolled in higher ed OR competitively employed 3. Enrolled in higher ed or other postsecondary training, or competitively employed or in some other employment	School/State	Indicator 14, State Educational Agency, Project Staff	Annually, June/July
Social Validity Outcomes				
Stakeholders' Perceptions of Feasibility and Effectiveness of CIRCLES	Focus Groups Consumer Satisfaction Surveys	Teachers Agency Members Students Parents	Project Staff	Annually, April/May
Treatment Fidelity				
Adherence and Compliance of Program Components	Treatment Fidelity Checklist	Team Members	Project and School Staff	After every CLT and SLT
Exposure of Amount of Program Content Delivered				
Participant Responsiveness				
Program Differentiation				
Student Demographic Info				
Age, Grade, Gender, Race, and Disability Information	Students' IEP Files, PowerSchool Files	Individual Students	School Personnel	Annually, May–July
Interagency Collaboration				
Interagency Collaboration	Interagency Collaboration Survey	SLT and CLT Members	Project Staff	Annually, June/July

Table 2
CIRCLES districts post-school outcomes 1 year after graduation – baseline data**

District	Percent of students enrolled in a post-secondary education program or employed	Percent of students enrolled in higher education	Percent of students not engaged
A	72	42	28
B	62	31	38
C*	63	29	37

*Districts A & B had PSO data from 2012; the most recent data available for district C is from 2010. **These data must be carefully interpreted when considering CIRCLES, because not all students who receive special education services will be brought to CIRCLES. In fact, CIRCLES targets students with lower levels of academic and social functioning, with the highest levels of need. However, any student with a disability who experiences need for involvement from multiple agencies in order to achieve a successful transition to adult life may be brought to CIRCLES.

Table 3
Focus group questions for agency personnel

Question
What is the primary benefit you get from coming to team meetings?
Describe your experience with the Community Level Team (for those who served on the CLT)
Tell me about your experiences preparing for and serving on the School Level Team (if applicable)
Describe how the events from the School Level Team, such as student needs for services, impacted practice
If you could change anything about your experience with CIRCLES, what would it be?

salient from the meetings. After all three focus groups were completed, we generated a list of themes; using grounded theory, we used data from all three groups to identify key themes, or codes, to add to our list, and grouped these themes into similar concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once we had described concepts, the second and third authors worked independently to code the entire transcript of each focus group, by bracketing transcribed sections of the focus groups that spoke to a given theme, or "code," and labeling them with the abbreviation assigned to that theme. After independent coding was complete, the second and third authors met several times to achieve inter-rater agreement on given codes for each section of text. Codes were then entered into AtlasTi, a qualitative data analysis program, and reports on each individual codes were generated. The second and third authors revisited the code reports and generated categories based on the concepts. From these categories, the themes of challenges and successes of CIRCLES implementation were developed, with sub-categories under each primary theme.

3. Results

After our final analysis, data from our focus groups fell into two categories: (a) challenges and barriers, and (b) successes of CIRCLES implementation. These two primary categories, along with the sub-categories that emerged are described below.

3.1. Challenges and barriers

The category of challenges and barriers was divided into five sub-categories (a) awareness among agency and school staff, (b) preparing students and families for SLT meetings, (c) provider agencies need for student information prior to meeting time, (d) issues with follow up after SLT meetings, and (e) practical issues.

3.1.1. Awareness among agency and school staff

Prior to commencing CIRCLES, there was a general lack of awareness among both agency representatives and school staff about what services were available within a given district. The lack of knowledge across agencies was a barrier to collaboration between service providers. Furthermore, teachers did not know what services were available and, using the old service delivery model, did not know who to invite to IEP meetings, because they lacked the knowledge of what services could be provided for their students. The CIRCLES model of service delivery addresses both of these issues by bringing agencies to the table to collaborate and discuss the services they can provide, and by educating teachers who bring their students to SLT meetings. However, there still exists a need to educate teachers across the districts and across grade levels about services available in each district. Many providers have a long waiting list (3–5½ years) to receive services. If teachers of younger students are made aware of these services, they can direct parents to get their children on waiting lists earlier, and by the time the student is of the age that services are needed, they will have progressed through the list. One agency provider stated it best:

I think if we can get the parents in at that meeting when they're freshman then if we can get them signing up for the innovations waiver … , we can get them hooked up with somebody with the Arc..., who says we can help you fill out some of this paperwork and then by the time we see them again to touch base as juniors they'll be in much better condition.

Initially, agency members in all three counties struggled to understand their agency's role in the CIRCLES process. Because this was a first time for everyone

involved, we all figured this out as we moved on. How each agency could participate in CIRCLES was clarified after the first SLT meeting in each district. This is evident in the comments of one provider:

If we're not at the table then we may be sending some of these students down the wrong path. This is an opportunity to collaborate and we want people, students, people that need our services to know who we are and what services we do have to provide so that's sort of become how we feel like we fit in.

Each district approached the need to educate teachers on what services are available in different ways, but the CLT was involved in every effort in every district. Some CLTs chose to deliver a panel presentation to all teachers from the district, while others chose to give this information to school leaders, and enable them to disseminate the information to their staff at each school.

3.1.2. Preparing students and families for SLT meetings

Equally important to the successful implementation of CIRCLES was preparing teachers, students, and families for the SLT meeting. Initially, some districts struggled with teacher buy-in to the CIRCLES process. Some teachers did not seem to view CIRCLES as something that would help their students. Across the board, once teachers experienced an SLT meeting, the benefits to their students, as well as their role in preparing students for the SLT was clarified. Teacher buy-in was significantly higher after the first SLT meeting.

Each district approached the challenges of establishing teacher buy-in differently. The district staff of one district videotaped the SLT meetings from schools with high teacher buy-in and played them for teachers of schools who had less of an understanding of the importance of the process. Another district held repeated teacher training sessions at each school. The third district trained all of their teachers at one 4-hour mandatory training.

Preparing families for the SLT presented a different challenge. It is essential to have someone at the SLT meetings to support the students. Too often as students get older, their parents no longer attend IEP or transition meetings. If family members cannot attend the SLT to support students, it would benefit students to have an adult friend, advocate, or other supportive adult there on their behalf. Each district's CLT was tackling the issue of how to get information about waivers, waiting lists, and how to navigate the system and process to students and families in their community.

These efforts are taking the form of resource fairs at schools and local community centers, mobile outreach units that travel to churches to present information to neighborhoods, and by creating and disseminating parent resource brochures. Thinking outside the box, one agency member commented, "... what we need to do possibly is do that mobile blood van kind of thing where we're going out to the housing authority offices and different housing places ... "

3.1.3. Provider agencies' need for student information prior to meeting time

Agency providers reported needing more information about students prior to SLT meetings.

Being able to see ... each diagnosis, kind of what's going on and getting a clear understanding of what the needs are for that individual vs. trying to get out of them you know, what are the areas you're having trouble in, you know, different diagnosis qualifies for different services so it all depends on you know, that part?

If agency members know about students prior to each SLT meeting, the representatives of agencies already serving a student can bring information to help guide the development of an appropriate transition plan. In addition, agencies that can provide services related to students' interests or needs would be better prepared for the meeting. The need for agencies to have this information was offset by the valid concern of school staff for protecting the privacy of their students. One suggestion from all three districts was to obtain a release for sharing information back and forth between schools and agency providers prior to the meeting. One challenge was getting permission to share information forms signed by parents/guardians and returned to school in a timely fashion.

3.1.4. Following up from the SLT meeting

Another challenge identified by agency and school personnel was following up from the SLT meetings. Across all three districts, there were challenges with follow up at the level of parents, special education teachers, and agency service providers. There was also an issue of communication; students and families heard at the SLT meeting about services they may qualify for through a given agency, and assumed that they were automatically going to receive these services, but failed to make an intake appointment at the agency to start a case to receive services. Students and families, alike, often needed additional help to access supports they needed from agencies.

... it's not just putting the information in their hands but it's walking them through that information that's there, walking them through the paperwork they may need to complete to access services or to get on wait lists or whatever those things may be.

All three districts are developing plans to support students, parents, and teachers in following through with accessing services. There is a need for each district to develop a system for following up that assigns the responsibility to an individual or group and provides timelines for completion of follow up activities.

3.1.5. Practical issues

Practical issues related to scheduling and SLT meetings running over their allotted time arose in all three districts. A greater issue that presented itself was transportation, which seemed to be an overarching problem, whether it was getting students and parents to the SLT or to other school meetings designed to disseminate information about services the agencies provide. Suggestions were made to (a) look for volunteer groups such as the faith community, who may be able to provide transportation or (b) taking the meetings to the parents. Many of the district's CLTs have adopted transportation as a future area of focus, explained by one agency member, below.

Addressing the transportation issue as far as for the school level team meetings and is getting parents where they need to be and students too if they're folks that have already exited for all intents and purposes and that's what I've got as our big goals for next year as a community level team.

3.2. Successes of CIRCLES implementation

The category of successes was divided into four subcategories (a) networking and collaboration between agencies and school personnel, (b) improved communication about services, (c) empowering students and parents by having them lead the meetings, and (d) helping change students' lives.

3.2.1. Networking and collaboration between agencies and school personnel

Across counties, both CLT and SLT members were enthusiastic about the networking and interagency collaboration taking place. At CLT meetings, discussions were rich and included discussing how agencies could work together to assist students, share agency information about available community services, and work together as one team member stated to "break down some of the barriers in the community." Collaboration and networking at the SLT included how agencies could work together to meet the needs of students and their families. Teams were solution focused, when one agency could not provide, others stepped in to ensure student and family needs were met. One team member commented, "It's not necessarily competitive but again, it's all about the individual. What's best for this person?" Another commented:

It doesn't feel as much like work, it feels like something enjoyable, you get to interact with different people and so I think that's been a pleasure. I'm looking forward to the things we're going to be able to do.

3.2.2. Improved communication about services

Collaboration among community agencies went beyond collaborating to deliver services to students and informing others about services they provide; service providers were collaborating to inform other participating agencies of their discipline and services they offer by conducting staff trainings. Several counties had previously established cooperative teams that developed systems for ensuring agency information about services was distributed to the community. Through CIRCLES those relationships were enhanced to include better distribution methods to students and families. For example, all three districts developed transition-focused resource guides for parents, and have made these available as students enter their senior year, at their senior year IEP meeting, and at the end of the school year. Two counties developed innovative ways to distribute agency information (i.e., district's exceptional children's website, pocket reference resource, district meetings, videotaped infomercials for teachers).

3.2.3. Empowering students and parents by having them lead the meetings

Team members noted a strength of CIRCLES was that it empowered students and their families, by equipping them with information about agencies. Agency members were impressed by the volume of students they were able to see, "... just within this school year we've already staffed 21 students among the four high schools that we're working with ...." CIRCLES teams were able to help students and families understand processes and procedures including eligibility requirements and how to apply for services, giving them tools to navigate the system themselves. As one member noted:

... to be able to explain to them you know what is going on and because there's some things that happen when they turned 18 that it's a little different and to be able to explain that to them and maybe see a light bulb go off that they can have actually understood something that maybe they've not, because not having or not thought about asking us before.

Finally, all three school districts implemented a process to ensure when parents left the SLT meetings they had a packet of information relevant to their child's transition. As a result, in some cases, what started as a plan for helping a student, turned into a venue for providing assistance for family needs such as housing and transportation. As another member said, "... we wound up helping some of the families with transportation issues that they didn't know that we could do."

3.2.4. Helping change student lives

In several of the counties, teachers excelled in preparing students for their SLT meeting. Part of this preparation included helping students focus on what they wanted to do after high school in term of employment, education or training, and independent living. Students came to SLT meetings prepared to tell agency providers what they wanted to do and receive information about how the agencies can help them achieve their post-school goals. As one agency member stated, their county:

... is doing such a great job as a county of really making sure that your teachers know what needs to happen to prepare the students to come in. So we don't have any students coming in cold, they come in ... and they present to a group of adults they've never met [with their] all about me presentation: this is who I am this is what I like to do, these are things I need help with, and here's what I want to do after I graduate, and here's how you can help.

Even students with more significant cognitive disabilities participate in leading their SLT meeting to the extent possible. Teachers work with students so they can participate on their own level. As one agency representative noted:

... [some] students had more [severe] autism and the teacher and the student work together making the power point but it took the teacher saying, ok tell them your name and then he says it. Ok, what do you like? And he could look, there were pictures up there that I'm guessing that the student helped pick out some pictures of a car or whatever the thing was but it was neat to see

that the teacher was respecting the student to still be his meeting ...

Another comment made by many was about the change seen in students after leading their SLT meeting. Not only were students benefiting from the community services offered at the SLT meetings, but by leading their presentations at these meetings, students were enhancing their social skills. As one team member notes:

I've seen both of them since their presentation and they're like, "Hi!" So it helped, it was, I can see how that really helped them because they were a little more open, a little more direct to talk, so I can see the benefits of that.

Finally, as one teacher remarked on the benefits of one of her students presenting at an SLT "... she says it was amazing. Just to see and hear everything that each one had to say, that they could help the students with [what] she says. It was great."

4. Discussion

4.1. Limitations

Before we discuss the findings of this study, there are several limitations worth noting. First, these data are part of a first year formative program evaluation of the CIRCLES model for service delivery. As such, they represent a small portion of the possible data available, and an early "snapshot" of CIRCLES in action. They are an incomplete record of our work in CIRCLES; input from parents and students was not gathered in year one due to constraints associated with time, resources, and implementation. These data will be gathered in subsequent years and used to inform our continued program improvements. Another area of data that are lacking in the current study are those of the post-school outcomes of our CIRCLES students. We will begin one year after graduation (summer of year two) gathering post school outcomes from students who went through CIRCLES.

4.2. Changes in policy and practice

Two major changes in policy and procedure worth noting resulted from the first year of CIRCLES implementation across these three counties. First, in an example of true collaboration, one county's CLT identified barriers to serving students in the population of interest; among these barriers was a lack of training

in the county for jobs actually available within the county. The community college responded by developing, through their continuing education department, five strands of study to address these needs. The programs developed prepared students to work in five fields (a) childcare, (b) food services, (c) landscaping, (d) office assistant, and (e) custodial assistant. At the CLT meeting, the community college representative presented these five strands to the other members for approval and feedback, and explained that four of the five were ready to "go live" in the fall of year two. They only needed a commercial grade kitchen in order to launch the fifth – food services. Another CLT member offered a facility that had recently been closed as a site for the food services training. All five programs have begun, and three graduated students in May of year two.

Another successful policy change resulting from CIRCLES implementation occurred in a different county, where the local community college had a policy that was not in support of the students primarily served by CIRCLES. In this state, there are two different diploma tracks, the standard course of study (SCS), which is how most students graduate, and the occupational course of study (OCS) which is more geared toward occupational training for students who are not likely to attend a four year university. In one county, the community college had a policy of not accepting OCS diplomas for "certificate bearing" programs, such as automobile mechanic and cosmetologist preparation programs. These are two programs that OCS students tend to gravitate toward. Prior to CIRCLES, special education teachers at local high schools were unaware of the policy, and often wrote transition plans for their students that included attending one of these programs. During the first CIRCLES SLT meeting in this county, the community college representative explained that such programs at their institution required either a SCS diploma or a GED. Teachers and SLT members began generating creative ways that their students could receive training and experience without enrolling in the programs. During the second year of implementation, the community college actually changed its policy regarding OCS diplomas, so that now, any student with a diploma, either SCS or OCS, can take the placement tests and enroll in the certificate granting programs that will prepare them to work in the field of their choice.

4.3. Implications for practice

Although CIRCLES enjoyed considerable success in its first full year of implementation, several barriers were identified above. As we continue implementation here and begin implementing in other districts and states, there are some barriers to address: (a) lack of awareness of services available, (b) preparing students for SLT meetings, (c) sharing information prior to the meetings, and (d) following up after SLT meetings. We address each below.

4.3.1. Lack of awareness of services available

Agency representatives, teachers, parents and students all lack an understanding of services available and the requirements and limitations of each. Although many districts have downloadable information on websites, printed resource guides, and pocket references, the usefulness of such tools is limited without the opportunity to understand how the information relates to a specific student or situation. We suggest pairing previously mentioned strategies with face-to-face options, such as agency fairs, panel discussions, and meet-and-greet opportunities to prevent information gaps and allow for clarification and understanding. Such information sharing between agencies and schools in particular must be an ongoing process by necessity due to the constantly changing landscape of legislation, policies, procedures, staff, and students.

4.3.2. Preparing students for SLT meetings

We found students were the best prepared in districts with high levels of teacher buy-in. When implementing in future areas, we suggest several additional steps to improve both the buy in of the teachers and the preparation of the students. First, additional training and support in self-determination and student led IEP meetings will help set a backdrop for the CIRCLES model of service delivery. In addition, allowing teachers to view videos of model SLT meetings or to visit districts or schools already implementing CIRCLES and directly observe their SLT meetings can help teachers understand how the meeting works and what to do to prepare their students. Finally, offering trainings geared specifically toward teachers and paraprofessionals that include task analysis for preparing a student for the SLT can support teachers in doing their best so that their students' SLT meetings are maximized.

4.3.3. Sharing student information prior to meetings

Obtaining parental permission in a timely fashion to invite outside agencies to the SLT meeting is critical to the success of the overall meeting. When agency members know specifics about the students they will team

on a given day, they can prepare specific handouts and talking points to speak directly to the needs of each individual student. Moreover, when agency members have a "heads up" about the students presenting, they can invite or suggests additional team members who might be able to meet student or family specific needs, on a case by case basis.

4.3.4. Following up after SLT meetings

One of the difficulties with transition is that no one really owns it. Special education teachers are tasked with planning for it, but the follow-through and what happens to students after they leave special education and the K-12 public school system is often quite different from what we had planned. It is no surprise, then, that one of the struggles our teams and districts faced was that of following up. Although each team recorded action items for each meeting, there was a lack of follow-through on behalf of students, parents, teachers, and agency members across all three counties. We have several suggestions to improve levels of follow through. First, have every agency member take notes of the meeting and generate an "action item" for each student. Compile all of these notes together in a master list of minutes and distribute widely to each member of the SLT, the special education teacher, paraprofessionals working with the student, the student, and her or his parents. Second, set aside the first 30–45 minutes of every subsequent SLT meeting to discuss the students teamed at the previous meeting, review action items and identify what steps still need to be taken and by whom. Finally, assign specific members of the SLT to follow up with the family on items that may have dropped off the parents' or students' radars.

4.4. Future directions

As we continue our formative evaluation of CIRCLES as a model for service delivery, we will increase our data collection efforts. Input from students, parents, and teachers on the implementation process will be vital in subsequent years to the regular improvement of the program. We will also look at data from numerous sources, included in Table 1, to inform our efforts.

5. Conclusion

CIRCLES is an effective new service delivery model that streamlines the transition planning process,

making everyone's work more efficient and effective. It improves interagency collaboration and increases the knowledge of, and access to, community services for students with disabilities leaving high school. More research is needed to determine the specific mechanisms impacted by CIRCLES at the student level. Furthermore, CIRCLES staff must consider the development of an implementation guide, as well as training materials that could be taken utilized by districts in more remote settings. As we continue to collect data, including post-school outcomes data, on our students and our school and agency partners, we will identify the aspects of CIRCLES that are mandatory to its success and those that are "optional." CIRCLES warrants further research and support as a new service delivery model and a method for increasing interagency collaboration in the transition planning process.

Acknowledgments

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