Preface

From our experience in schools, we find transition from school to adulthood for youth with disabilities to be one of the most complex of all educational endeavors. And yet, when it works, the rewards far exceed the toil and turmoil. For youth with disabilities and their families, the challenge of moving from school-based special education services to adulthood is immense. However, even in the face of formidable odds, the field of transition is making progress on several fronts. First, we are excited about recent legislative and advocacy efforts that reinforce the importance of integrated employment for all students. Second, we are pleased to see students with disabilities being supported in postsecondary education with greater frequency. Third, we are delighted to see youth with disabilities engaging in integrated community activities. The success of postschool outcomes depends on interrelated factors, including student motivation, the involvement of parents and families, the presence of trained teacher and transition team members (we use the terms *transition educator* and *transition professional*), the use of research-based practices, the willingness of educators to work together (we refer to *transition teams*), and a collaboration of professionals across disciplines in the best interests of the youth. Transition research has established ways to increase successful postschool outcomes. In fact, the resurgence of transition research in recent years, along with the call for *college and career readiness* for youth with disabilities, gives us optimism that we may see significant improvements in the future.

But we remain humble as to the multifarious nature of the transition process. Supporting a youth with disabilities from school to a self-determined career path, a plan for postsecondary education, and a highly valued independent life rich with social and recreational activities is a formidable and painstaking process. When it works, success is celebrated by all stakeholders. In practice, the small successes along the pathway deserve celebration because transition is ultimately a journey, not an outcome.

PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

The purpose of this book is to describe issues, processes, and outcomes involved in the transition from special education to adulthood for youth with disabilities, with particular attention to:

- Evidence-based, research-based, and promising practices in transition approaches.
- Practices that can be implemented in schools and communities to improve post-school outcomes.
- Methods for involving youth and their families as driving forces in the process of transition.

POINTS OF EMPHASIS

In this book, we address youth who have various disabilities, focusing mainly on low-incidence developmental disabilities (e.g., mild, moderate, and profound intellectual disability; autism spectrum disorder) and high-incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbance). With respect to services for students with profound and multiple disabilities, we recognize the need for specialized transition services and support systems. However, we only touch on transition services for students with profound and multiple disabilities because we do not find a research base sufficient to guide practice. We take the position that a person with a disability is best understood by analyzing his or her unique, individual characteristics and the environments within which he or she operates. The "deficit model" used in some human and medical service approaches is inconsistent with our experience as we work with youth on a daily basis and learn to recognize their strengths, aspirations, and dreams. We use the term *disability* only because it is conventional in the current lexicon.

We use the terms *transition educator* and *transition professional* to refer to specialists who provide transition services. In practice, teachers, secondary service coordinators, career technical educators, vocational rehabilitation counselors, social workers, paraprofessionals, and others can provide transition services. We use these more general terms as all-encompassing ones. Finally, we use the term *stakeholder* to refer to transition team members (e.g., family members, employers, friends) who advocate for youth with disabilities.

In each chapter, we describe vignettes involving youth in transition and their families. Most of these are distillations of our own experiences over the years. Consistent with those experiences, the vignettes—if one follows the youth from chapter to chapter—represent points along a journey from special education to adulthood. We describe the challenges, barriers, and opportunities experienced by these hypothetical youth and families and hope they might resonate with readers.

Importantly, we have developed deep respect for families and are humbled by the challenges they face when their youth make the transition from school to adulthood. We understand how families face day-to-day struggles of putting food on the table, clothes on kids, and gasoline in the tank. Our vignettes are meant to reflect the challenges

that youth and families face in transition. As such, we have tried to be realistic and not "sugarcoat" the process. Throughout the book, we speak to the importance of understanding and respecting family priorities while being stubbornly assertive about planning a youth's transition starting at an early age. A family's day-to-day struggles may obscure the importance of early transition planning. When immediate needs take precedence, it is hard to recognize a future event as critical. But families need frequent reminders of the value of early transition planning. So do educators. Only when a team of committed educators, family members, and the youth dedicate themselves to the career and lifelong learning of the individual involved will transition be successful.

SOME THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION AND CHANGE

Our perceptions of what constitutes progress over time in education depend on our perspectives. We may look at changes in the field of education over a 50-year period and conclude, "Yes, things have changed," but also "No, it is not nearly enough." For example, 50 years ago, special education was in its infancy. Special educators who provided services were just beginning to serve children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. A free, appropriate public education was an ideal held by special educators and parents. The Education for All Handicapped Act (originally called Public Law 94-142), which provided entitlements for children with disabilities in public schools, was becoming a reality. Yet, most students receiving special education services were housed in a self-contained school or a self-contained classroom. Deinstitutionalization was just beginning as a social movement. State institutions for individuals with disabilities were unlocking the exit doors. Community-based service programs were in their infancy. Many children requiring significant supports were moving from state institutions to community-based intermediate care facilities. Schools that accepted children with disabilities housed them in classrooms away from the mainstream.

Yes, things have changed. But today, self-contained classrooms remain in many schools. In some cases, special education remains a place, not a service. General educators, in some instances, do not participate in teaching students with special needs because they have not been adequately taught how to do so. Inclusion may amount to a student with disabilities sitting idle in the corner of a general education classroom. Many students with disabilities are still far behind their peers in academic knowledge and skills, and the distance widens as they enter secondary schools. No, it is not nearly enough.

More specifically, consider transition from school to adulthood. Fifty years ago, transition was not a part of educational language. The prospect of a young adult with disabilities being selected for employment or enrolling in a course at a postsecondary institution of higher education was unlikely. Adults exiting state institutions for individuals with disabilities were, for the most part, finding their way to sheltered workshops. Those programs consisted largely of vocational, social, and recreational activities. The reasoning was that, once learned, these skills would lead to community integration and employment. Yet, after the program, skilled individuals often stayed put. Segregation occurred for numerous, complex reasons related to disincentives for

community placement and lack of an infrastructure to support integration. There were only the beginnings of federal and state agencies overseeing special education and adult-level services for individuals with disabilities, so very few standards or common expectations existed in service delivery.

Yes, things have changed. Today, the prospect of a young adult who has graduated from the special education system being able to hold a job, enroll in a postsecondary education program, or live independently is becoming increasingly common. But employment is, in many cases, less than 50% for former students up to 8 years out of high school. For those who do work, wages are low compared to their agemates. Total hours worked are less than full time, and few receive insurance or other benefits. Workshops and day programs serve increasing numbers of individuals with disabilities in segregated facilities. Although some employers have hired workers with disabilities, the majority are still hesitant. Postsecondary education institutions (meaning universities, colleges, adult education, etc.) are starting to "take hold" as options for young adults with disabilities. It is still unusual for college faculty to have been sufficiently trained in how to accommodate students with disabilities. Many high school special education teachers do not understand the concept of postsecondary education for young adults with disabilities, and they focus only on moving current students to the next grade level. Education budgets have been cut to the point that only essential, classroom-based academic services can be provided to students. Integrating classroom with community opportunities in real-world environments to reinforce academic skills and to teach functional skills are cost-prohibitive. Young adults with disabilities who have aspirations of determining and realizing their own career paths are, in some cases, told to "think more realistically." No, it is not nearly enough.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Our interest in transition stems from years of working alongside youth and young adults as they seek their pathways to independence. We are captivated by their enthusiasm, motivation, and drive to determine their futures. Routinely, we are reminded of the exuberance of youth and feel privileged to experience it vicariously. And we ride the rollercoaster of emotion that comes with their successes, disappointments, and frustrations. Throughout the transition process, we have grown deeply respectful of parents, families, and teachers who catch the dream, learn the ropes, and defy the odds. Their hard work gives us hope for the future of the field of transition and the individuals with disabilities it serves. Collectively, the courage of youth and their stakeholders provides the motivation for this book. We are writing the book because we believe in the people, processes, and outcomes that are truly attainable with thoughtful planning and action.