Postgraduation for Special Needs Students

Programs for students with learning disabilities help them move forward into the workforce and/or college.
By: Ron Schachter
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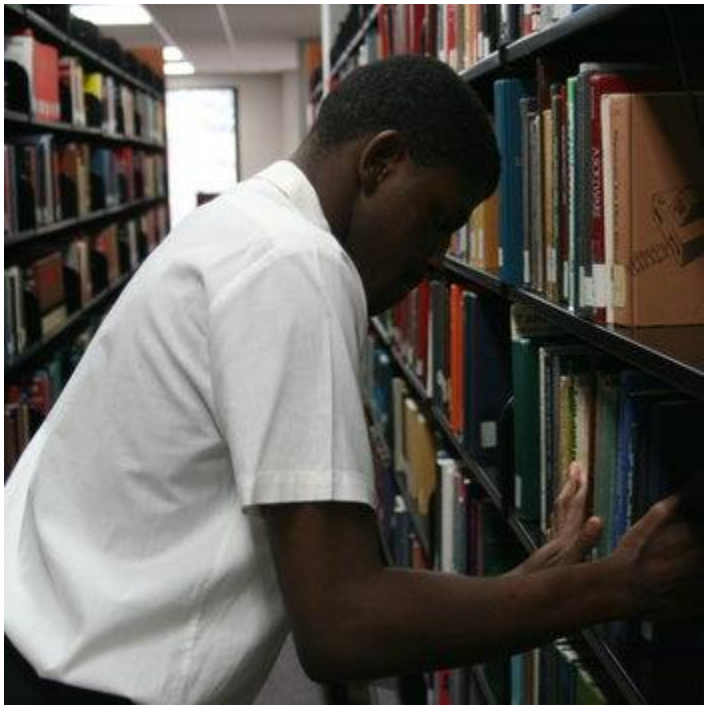

A 2012 graduate of the Memphis City Schools works a few hours in the nearby University of Memphis' library, as part of the College Campus Transition Program. He worked in multiple fields throughout the semester.

Special education occupies a large part of the mission—and budget—of many school districts. With learning disabilities such as ADHD and dyslexia each estimated to affect more than 10 percent of the school-age population, special education teachers have their hands full helping those students navigate increasingly rigorous, state-mandated curricula.

An equally daunting challenge, though, is how to serve a growing student population with more severe learning problems, from intellectual disabilities (the term officially established in 2010 by Congress to replace mental retardation) to autism, a spectrum of cognitive and behavioral conditions that affects an expanding number of youngsters.

Transition to Adulthood male student is preparing food for same-day surgery patients at Mountainside Hospital in nearby Glen Ridge, N.J.

Last March, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that one in 88 8-year-olds have some form of autism, compared to their most recent estimate of one in 110. "We've continued to see a rise in the prevalence rates over the last 10 years. There's better diagnosis," says Lisa Goring, vice president of family services for the autism advocacy group Autism Speaks.

In May, meanwhile, a study published in the journal Pediatrics found that seven years after finishing high school, almost 35 percent of young adults with autism and 25 percent with an intellectual disability had not gone on to postsecondary education or had a paying job. The results, based on data collected from 2007 to 2008, stand in contrast to the 3 percent of those with milder learning disabilities in similar situations.

Helping students with intellectual disabilities and autism to make the transition from high school to self-sufficiency and employment has proved a challenge for special education departments, according to experts in and advocates for people with these learning disabilities. Since 1990, districts have been required to provide such services under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act.

Paul Wehman, Ph.D, and author of Life Beyond the Classroom: Transition Strategies for Young People with Disabilities and Autism & the Transition to Adulthood: Success Beyond the Classroom, says students with autism spectrum disorder have significant learning potential, but they learn and communicate in unique ways. “We know that students with significant learning and social challenges can perform complex tasks in hospitals, but they require IPOD supported technology, visual supports, behavioral rehearsal and modeling to be successful,” Wehman says. “Students can also do well in supported educational college programs, but again need the help of job coaches.”

The more districts can show success with these young people, the greater their potential will be realized and the more involved and supportive families and communities will become.

In 2007, Advocates for Children of New York—a nonprofit organization that focuses on advocacy and legal services for minority and low-income students—analyzed individual education plans in the New York City Public Schools and found that in more than a quarter, there was no transition planning. When there were transition plans, only 31 percent of the affected students had participated in the planning process. The report recommended that all personnel involved in the transition be better trained and supported, that transition services be personalized to each student, and that students and parents be involved.

Inadequacies in transition planning exist in many districts. “A lot of special education teachers coming out of colleges and universities today haven’t heard of transition coordinators,” says Roger Pierangelo, co-executive director of the National Association of Special Education Teachers. “That position is no longer in many schools because of economics. Every special education teacher who teaches at the secondary level should know transition services forward and backward.”

Changing the Landscape

A former student in Montclair's Transition to Adulthood program learns how to fill out a timesheet.

The postsecondary landscape and the prospects for students with autism, intellectual disabilities and other learning problems are beginning to change, though, as innovative programs create a different trajectory to the world of work and continuing education.

In Tennessee this past year, the Memphis City Schools and the University of Memphis Institute of Disability jointly piloted the College Campus Transition Program (CCTP), which brings high school seniors

with moderate disabilities to the UM campus, where they rotate through a series of internships in various university departments.

According to the program's directors at the Memphis schools, Pat Beane and Maurice Williams, the aim is to have these students learn about careers while still in high school, as well as benefit from the considerable resources of the neighboring university. Seven seniors, each with an intellectual disability, participated in CCTP's inaugural year.

During the first half of the yearlong program, based at the University of Memphis (or UM) campus, special education teachers from MCS provide classroom instruction on job preparation, take the students through career and academic assessments, and help them build electronic portfolios of the results. At the same time, the seniors work on learning and practicing life skills as fundamental as making eye contact and shaking hands.

The second term consists of putting that practice to work in the internship part of the program. "We try to match the work [on campus] to the students' interests and learning styles," explains Beane, who coordinates CCTP for the Memphis district's Exceptional Children and Health Services department. "There was one senior this past year who worked in child care, another in computer repair, and another in the library."

Beane also took the students farther afield. "Memphis depends on tourism," she explains, "and we went over to hotels, Graceland and the new riverboat [which operates from Memphis to New Orleans] to see the potential for jobs. Employability is the end result of this program."

With that goal in mind, the CCTP program included a four-week session this past summer. "It provided a more defined understanding of the education, skills and hand-on experiences these students need to master," explains Maurice Williams, director of administrative operations for UM's Institute of Disability.

The summer program also went further by purposely locating internships in offices on a satellite UM campus. "It's giving them a real-life understanding," Williams says of the arrangement. "They have to catch a campus bus, go to work on the second campus, and come back to the main campus to debrief."


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A young woman with Down syndrome works out at her neighborhood gym. She takes part in Montclair (N.J.) Public Schools' Transition to Adulthood program, which teaches students work skills, provides coaching and helps them navigate every day living.

The CCTP students have also been making use of a handheld device designed by a professor at the University of Memphis education school that allows them to check off each task or skill that they are practicing in their internships.

The CCTP program will expand to 10 seniors for the 2012-2013 school year and will include UM education and social science majors as mentors to each. The mentors will accompany the seniors to various campuswide events, emphasizing improving the seniors' socialization skills.

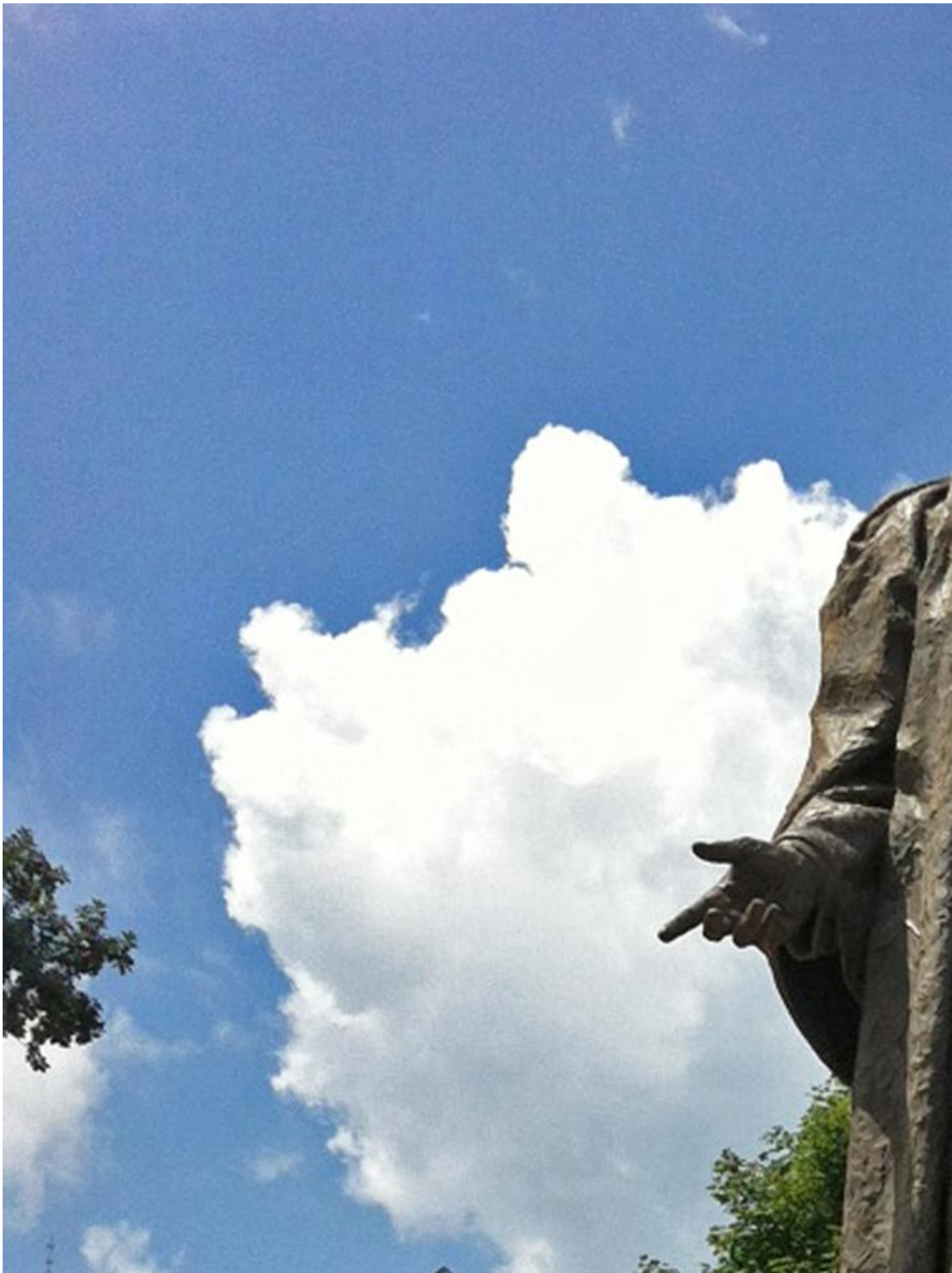
One of last year's seniors has already enrolled in a local vocational training institute with the aim of becoming a welder. The remainder will seek paying jobs this fall. Williams hopes that those as well as future CCTP classes will become prime candidates for a new two-year UM certificate program for learning-disabled students focused on helping them develop more marketable skills and meeting the needs of the city's growing hospitality industry.

Transitioning to Adulthood

An intensive program in the Montclair (N.J.) Public Schools, meanwhile, is targeting 18- to 22-year-old students who have significant learning disabilities and have not received a high school diploma. Federal law requires that districts provide such services as independent living skills training and connections to employment training programs in the local community. However, the quantity and quality of these services vary widely, lack structure, and often run the risk of becoming an afterthought.

Since 2008, two special education teachers and a half-dozen teaching assistants in Montclair have been building a more intensive model for the dozen or so young adults—most with intellectual disabilities or autism—who are part of the district's Transition to Adulthood program. The program teaches life and work skills, provides daily one-on-one coaching, and dispatches students to the local community for internships and the business of everyday living, from shopping to taking public transportation to working out at the gym.

The two teachers, Kate Stanton-Paule and Leslie Wallace, serve as the transition coordinators for the program, which produced its first "graduating class" of students in 2011. "They always had a transition program here," says Wallace. "It was mainly designed to provide work experience. But in 2008, a very active parent group felt that the outcomes would be better if we had a full community-based program."



High school students pose in front of the John Marshall statue at Marshall University. They took summer courses at the school's West Virginia Autism Training Center to learn how to navigate college when they cross that road.

That meant integrating students more fully into the surrounding community for work and daily errands, and teaching the requisite skills to make those ventures successful. Transition to Adulthood runs for the full school day. Every morning, the staff plots what individual students will be doing at their work sites and with their daily living skills. On Monday mornings, students plan the week's schedule, including work schedules and appointments.

They also meet individually with the teaching assistants, who coach them on transitional skills such as budgeting, Internet safety and time management. "Time management is huge," notes Stanton-Paule, who says that working with the students in the program is largely an exercise of individualization. "Oftentimes students are expected to fit into a program. We develop our program based on individual student needs—where they live, where they shop, the jobs they're interested in."

"It's based on the student's and family's vision of what they want for the future," adds Wallace. "When kids come to our program, we ask, 'Where do you see your life going?' We have one kid who says he wants to be a physical therapy aide, another who wants to work in a restaurant, and another who wants to go to a community college."

The Transition to Adulthood program has also leveraged its emerging relationship with Montclair State College. "I wanted to be creative about involving them at Montclair State," Stanton-Paule says. The good relationships that have been built include arranging internships in six departments on the college's campus, recruiting volunteer mentors from Montclair State's student ranks, and clearing the way for Transition to Adulthood students to visit classes and clubs on campus. The student who wants to become a physical therapy aide took prerequisite courses, including biology, anatomy and physiology and psychology at Montclair State, with a support person in class to help him organize and take notes.

At the West Virginia Autism Training Center at Marshall University, high school students attend a Discovery group, which is designed to enhance students' ability to navigate college life via social skills.

"We work really hard to build natural support as well," says Stanton-Paule. In the case of the aspiring physical therapy aide, who has autism, Stanton-Paule spoke to one of his college classes about that disability and how it expresses itself. Shortly afterward, the Transition to Adulthood student became involved in a study group with other students in the course.

Stanton-Paule and Wallace have arranged for other students to attend community colleges, even without having a high school diploma. All of the students in the program are headed to the workforce, one at a Barnes and Noble in book returns and receiving, another at a bakery while taking a college-level class in visual arts, and another—with a particular talent in gymnastics—as a teacher's assistant at a YMCA.

Wallace has a succinct way of measuring the progress the participants in the program have made. "It continues without us," she says. "We see our students continuing to go to their jobs, and we see them waiting for the bus to go to those jobs or to meet their mentors at Montclair State."

Focus on Autism

Some of the most promising programs in recent years have targeted students along the autism spectrum, including those at the higher end, most of whom are diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. These students are high-functioning but need support especially in the areas of organization and social skills.

For the past decade, the 29,000-student Cabarrus County Schools in Concord, N.C., has run special ed programs designed specifically for the district's autistic students. With the number of students diagnosed with autism increasing by about 20 a year, those programs have grown to 270 students. "We have the advantage of being a relatively large district, which allows us to diversify the programs we offer," says Markl Kies, the district's director of exceptional children's programs.

Also, the district operates classrooms for students with autism who are following the state Extended Content Standards. These classrooms focus on increasing communication, self-sufficiency and socially adaptive behaviors. And they implement teaching methods that have been effective for students with autism, including strategies developed under the TEACCH model. TEACCH, or Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication-related Handicapped Children, is a program developed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A girl in the Transition to Adulthood program in Montclair makes lasagna in preparation for adult living.

Learning Connections, an autism program focused on higher-functioning students in the district—with classrooms at six elementary, two middle, and two high schools—works with students at the higher end of the autism spectrum. Depending on their level of need, the 85 students in the program also attend regular classes during the school day. “There are a number of high-functioning students that can access the regular curriculum,” says Kies. “Before Learning Connections began, those students were getting a good amount of special education, but by teachers not that well versed in autism.”

“We do training for classroom teachers and administrators across the district so they know exactly what types of communication to expect from our autistic students,” notes Lisa Ewers, the exceptional children coordinator of program services at Cabarrus County Schools. “We’ve figured out the supports they need and how to get that to them more consistently than we have in the past.”

The Learning Connections’ high school classrooms each accommodate up to 14 students. “There’s a period for teaching skills, and we really work on social cues,” says autism program specialist Mary Moss. “We also do a lot of inventory checklists: ‘What is it that you like? What kind of environment do you like? What type of jobs might suit you?’”

Ewers says most of the high school students have the benefit of participating in the program in K8. “They’ve already had exposure to self-monitoring and self-advocacy skills, and they’ve had extended time to work on these skills,” she says. “The best time to start is at the elementary level. You can keep the skills gap from growing.”

“We’ve definitely seen a lot of success stories, of students able to navigate schedules and meet the demands at the high school level, and finding a niche within the high school,” says Kies. Graduates often continue at community colleges, she adds.

To College and Beyond

“We’re seeing more and more learners go on to college, typically with supports,” observes Goring from Autism Speaks, who notes that a growing number of colleges offer special programs for students with Asperger’s or other high-functioning forms of autism.

Marshall University, in Huntington, W.Va., opened the West Virginia Autism Training Center 10 years ago. Today it serves 36 students (95% of whom will graduate), who spend 12 to 15 hours weekly at the center with a graduate student mentor, who helps them navigate class syllabi, organize workloads and develop checklists of what needs to be done. The mentors also help students cultivate their social skills. “The academic and social supports are both equally vital to a successful outcome,” says Marc Ellison, the center’s associate director. “The number one need that people have in varying degrees is developing social networks on campus.”

For the past four years, the center has also offered a summer program at Marshall for almost a dozen autistic high school students nationwide entering their senior year. They live in a dormitory, take a class and get a feel for the campus when there are fewer people around, says the program’s executive director, Barbara Becker-Cottrill. “They may not originally want to be college-bound, but they get a taste of it, have a good experience, and often want to pursue a college education.”

Becker-Cottrill continues: “Nationally, there’s been a huge shift in the mindset of colleges and universities, as well as high schools and junior high schools. The expectations are being raised, and that’s great. If these students are not challenged, they will not respond.”