Supporting Students in Effective Transitions Webinar Question and Answer Document

This document provides answers to questions asked during the live webinar "**Supporting Students in Effective Transitions**," hosted by the Region 9 Comprehensive Center (R9CC) and the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE), which took place on Tuesday, April 25, 2023. The webinar built off recommendations and insights from an infographic developed by the Region 9 Comprehensive Center Advisory Board. The webinar featured a panel discussion with students and staff from West40 Intermediate Service Center, R9CC advisory board members, and experts from NCSSLE on how youth-serving adults can best support students transitioning from nontraditional settings, such as alternative schools, to traditional school settings.

This document provides the panelists' answers to questions asked during the webinar. The responses are based on panelists' opinions and are supplemented with helpful evidence-based resources. This document does not provide an exhaustive guide for supporting student transitions; rather, it provides insights and resources from panelists and West40 to begin the discussion surrounding supporting students from nontraditional school setting in the transition to traditional school, and how youth-serving adults can help these students succeed.

Q: Any data in specific counties or states on successful transitions would be great and/or how are transitions being measured?

A: NCSSLE Expert: There are limited data on transitions from alternative schools to community schools. The infographic provided in the webinar cites some valuable research that we invite you to explore. With regard to a specific and collaborative transition process for students returning to a traditional school setting, Transitioning From Alternative Education Settings: A Process for Students With Behavioral Challenges is a five-part process that involves developing a transition plan, determining transition criteria, and supporting the student during the transition. The process includes suggested data to collect and how to monitor over time.

Please note: Data on alternative schools exist and can be informative as well. For example, the Maryland State Department of Education recently released data in the form of a presentation. It shares disaggregated data on a number of academic indicators for the state, including graduation, and then offers case studies of alternative education from across the country.

It also is important to add that, as a means of prevention, the Community Schools strategy seeks to transform schools into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. Community Schools have been shown to contribute to increased student attendance, on-time grade progression, and high school graduation. In this webinar, a panel of experts describes the Full-Service Community Schools model, discusses key elements of the approach, and shares information on how communities and schools can leverage diverse funding streams to support the development and implementation of the Full-Service Community Schools approach.

Q: How does this work apply to serving youth who have been learning in online learning placements as well as brick and mortar as students reintegrate into the face-to-face setting?

A: NCSSLE Expert: The principles shared during the webinar remain with building positive relationships being core, especially with the transition back to in-person learning. In addition to improving relationships between students and staff, to create a supportive learning environment, it also is critical to have positive relationships among students, staff, families and others.

NCSSLE has a [webpage dedicated to relationships](#), providing key information and resources. You can find examples and strategies for building positive relationships. In the short term, it can help you consider what you might want to adjust.

Also, if your school is not already administering a school climate survey, this could be a helpful way for your school to understand the perception of students, staff, and families about relationships and more. For example, within the [U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Surveys](#) are a set of questions dedicated to measuring perceptions regarding [relationships](#). With that information, one can work with students, staff, and families to plan improvements. NCSSLE also has a [School Climate Improvement Resource Package](#) with tools dedicated to help with that.

Q: How do we best work to include and build a stronger bond with parents/caregivers in supporting the transition process?

A: NCSSLE Expert: You will recall that one of the student panelists shared how challenges at home directly impacted their experience of school and posed barriers to learning. In response, one preventive approach that schools and districts may consider is in strengthening their commitment to family engagement, fostering an understanding that closer collaboration with families is vitally important to students' success. Connecticut has done a lot of work to build a robust culture of partnership between families and state education and human service programs.

[Full, Equal and Equitable: Partnerships with Families](#) presents the definition, guiding principles, and recommendations for capacity building, as well as comparative examples of evidence-based high-impact strategies for engaging families. [Alternative Educational Opportunities for Students Who Have Been Expelled: Best Practice Guidelines for Program Implementation](#) provides a framework to support the implementation of high-quality programming for students placed in an existing alternative program or school or a different alternative educational opportunity.

Q: How does the reputation of Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) "being for the 'bad kids'" limit the acceptance of these restorative, authentic, individualized approaches in "traditional" schools?

A: NCSSLE Expert: That reputation can create a wall, preventing successful transitions that perpetuate negative relationships and outcomes. To move past these issues, traditional schools and ALEs can partner from the moment students transfer to an ALE, thinking exit at entry. That allows both to build stronger relationships so that traditional schools can know what supports are being provided to students, have a better understanding of their students, and can build a stronger bridge for students to successfully transition back, including considering what may need to be put in place upon return.

The [NDTAC Transition Toolkit 3.0](#) highlights the processes and practices that can help systemwide administrative processes, coordination efforts, strategies, and communication practices that improve a youth's experience in the juvenile justice system and reentry into the community. Although it addresses juvenile justice specifically, it also speaks to ALEs and the general principles that frame the resource apply to ALEs as well.

Q: What would be a good way to connect this one adult to the student? How does this happen?

A: Illinois Teacher of the Year: This can be done in a number of ways. From a logistics perspective, oftentimes the one supportive adult also is the person who the student visits on a daily basis for study hall or homeroom. In an elementary school setting, perhaps it is the person the student "checks out"" with at the end of the day. I saw one school even assigned every teacher in the building with a caseload of students and families so that families always knew who their point of contact was (which can be especially helpful in large districts when families feel overwhelmed about who to contact with questions/concerns). Ultimately, providing students with one trusted adult whom they know they can visit with questions/concerns makes them feel supported. Admittedly, building these kinds of relationships takes time. But the return on investment can be astronomical.

Additional Resources

- Buchanan, R., Ruppert, T., & Cariveau, T. (2016). Transition supports for at-risk students: A case example. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, *19*(2), 9–15.

- DeLamar, S., & Brown, C. G. (2016). Supporting transition of at-risk students through a freshman orientation model. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, *19*(2), 32–39.

Q: What suggestions do you have for school staff to support students when transitioning back to their resident district from a unique setting?

A: Illinois Teacher of the Year: My number one suggestion is to resist the urge to make unfair assumptions. Students transitioning back anticipate this, and school staff should be sensitive to any apprehension and/or fear students might harbor about feeling judged or ostracized. Anything school staff can do to facilitate a smooth transition for students, one that is free from judgment, is crucial. Students want to return and feel a part of their new school community even if they don't articulate that. They don't want to feel like outsiders during that transition. Extra efforts to do community building, and to make them feel a part of the school community, are essential. Furthermore, involving families in the transition is key. Families need to know that the school staff has the best interest of the students at heart so that students aren't receiving conflicting messages when they go home at the end of the school day. Creating a strong network of support between the school community and home, if possible, will help ensure that the student feels fully supported.

Additional Resources

- Buchanan, R., & Clark, M. (2017). Understanding parent–school communication for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Open Family Studies Journal*, *9*(Suppl 1 M5), 122–131.

- Mathur, S. R., & Clark, H.G. (2014). Community engagement for reentry success of youth from juvenile justice: Challenges and opportunities. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 37(4), 713–734. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44683944

- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students. (2018). *Quick guide on making school climate improvements*.

- Wilkinson, S., Kumm, S., & McDaniel, S. (2020). Transitioning from alternative education settings: A process for students with behavioral challenges. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *56*(1), 29–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451220910738

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Q: What happens when students are voicing things that they desire when it is not reasonable or good ideas for their future? How do the significant adults deal with still being the voice and advocating?

A: West40 Principal: I think being honest and transparent is always our motto. We help kids work on areas of strength and areas of growth. We talk about the impacts of their behavior and choices in a larger school setting, the real world, or whatever is next on their journey. We have hard conversations and do a lot of mirror versus window work. I think building relationships and trust helps our students know that even though we may be saying something they do not want to hear, we are always there for them and want what's best for them.

Additional Resources

- Kelchner, V. P., Evans, K., Brendell, K., Allen, D., Miller, C., & Cooper-Haber, K. (2020). [The effect of a school-based transitional support intervention program on alternative school youth's attitudes and behaviors](). *The Professional Counselor*, *7*(2), 169–184.

- Clark, H. G., Mathur, S., Brock, L., O'Cummings, M., & Milligan, D. (2016). *[Transition toolkit 3.0: Meeting the educational needs of youth exposed to the juvenile justice system]()* (3rd ed.). National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth.

Q: Do all students have plans for next year? How did they come up with these plans? And they do not appear to be involved in special education service transitions from age 18 to 21? Are any of them going to use those services?

A: West40 Principal: We do not currently service students with individualized education programs, yet we do make transition type plans, just sometimes more informally. This may look like meeting with a social worker from West40, their home school, and/or family members to apply to colleges, trade schools, or help with jobs after graduation. If it's a Middle School student, we develop transition plans with the home school as long as they are open to it. We also create liaisons with our West40 advocates in the respective home schools. We may share goal sheets, level-up sheets, and other documents to share with home schools what the students are currently working on.

Additional Resources

- Gagnon, J., & Barber, B. (2015). [Research-based academic and behavioral practices in alternative education settings: Best evidence, challenges, and recommendations](). In *Transition of Youth and Young Adults* (Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities, Vol. 28, pp. 225–271). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Q: For students: With the skills and strategies you have learned at West 40, do you feel like you could be successful back in a larger more traditional setting, or is the smaller and more therapeutic setting what works best for you? Asking because districts are constantly asked to place students in least restrictive environments.

A: West40 Teacher response: We have the advantage of having more time during the school day to unpack some previous traumas and habits and teach our students about how trauma impacts the brain and how we are wired. We also have time to practice these coping strategies and discuss them in the moment to seize many opportunities. That being said, I don't think it is ever a bad idea to teach students about the brain and when we are in the "back of our head" or the "amygdala" (fight, flight, freeze, follow mode). We use the book *[Reclaiming Youth at Risk]()* to emphasize the Circle of Courage model to

base our program on as well as the Dr. Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey book *What Happened to You* as the basis for a lot of conversations and interactions during the day.

Additional Resources

- Gagnon, J., & Barber, B. (2015). Research-based academic and behavioral practices in alternative education settings: Best evidence, challenges, and recommendations. In *Transition of Youth and Young Adults* (Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities, Vol. 28, pp. 225–271). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0735-004X20150000028010

- Chicago Public Schools. (2017). *Restorative practices guide and toolkit*.

- MAEC. (2021). *Getting started with restorative practices in schools: A guide for administrators and teacher leaders*.

- Trout, L. (2021). *The toolkit before the toolkit: Centering adaptive and relational elements of restorative practices for implementation success*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd.

Q: Can you talk about what your work looks like at your home campus? Do you work with outside practitioners? How do you work with students whose needs are greater than what schools can provide, with students who are experiencing anxiety, depression, school avoidance?

A: West40 Social Worker: My typical day involves mostly one-to-one sessions with students to work on deeper and more traumatic concerns. I think it is safe to say my day never goes as I plan it to, but I also don't expect it to. Student needs are prioritized according to crisis level. We do work with outside agencies, but we face the same dilemma as other districts. A waiting list is typically involved and the norm currently.

When student needs are greater than we can provide, we make sure to put families in contact with agencies that can assist and often make the first contact with family consent. I make myself available outside typical school hours, but I am not advocating for anyone to do this. This is just how I personally service students. I spend a good amount of time text messaging school avoidance students and often make a reinforcement plan to encourage them to come. I start out with 2 days, then 3 days, and so on. The reinforcement is of their choosing, within reason. I provide a safe space for students to talk, gather their thoughts, take a mental break, etc., when they need it as opposed to a schedule (goes back to my day not going as planned).

Additional Resources

- Gonsoulin, S., & Read, N. W. (2011). Improving educational outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems through interagency communication and collaboration. National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk.

- Mathur, S. R., & Clark, H. G. (2014). Community engagement for reentry success of youth from juvenile justice: Challenges and opportunities. Education and Treatment of Children, 37(4), 713–734. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44683944

Q: What does West40 do to be different?

A: West40 Social Worker: We are a smaller environment, which allows us to be more one to one and involved. We can dig deeper into issues and contact outside sources because of our caseload. We communicate via text with students, which does truly open the line of communication. It is often easier to type what is bothering us than it is to say it. This opens the door for more in-depth conversations at school. Look at our website to see how we all pride ourselves on being "different different."

Q: How do you educate the whole child at West40?

A: West40 Social Worker: We are able to dedicate more time to each student and work on issues outside the school setting. We recognize when it comes to individualized education programs, the issues need to be impacting them educationally, but I would challenge all of us to say how any outside factors do not. I try to connect to students on their level and meet them where they are at and not push them beyond their limits. A lot of that is paying attention to their body language and what they are not saying. I ask them to educate me on their world. That actually goes a long way with many of them. We strive to know their world and the way life works for them and then find ways to incorporate that into their learning and how we communicate with them.

Additional Resources

- About West40

- The Future of Education (West40)