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## **Preface**

This paper, the eleventh in a series of white papers sponsored by the Kean University Center for History, Politics, and Policy, explores the current employment policy and opportunities for autism spectrum disorder adolescents. Dr. Mariann Moran provides the context for autism spectrum disorder in adolescents and their future employment opportunities in New Jersey. The white paper series is co-edited by Dr. Sadeghi and Dr. Callahan, faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership at Kean University.

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### **About the Contributing Author:**

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## **Paving the road for young adults with autism spectrum disorder**

### **Problem**

The number of young adults identified with autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is growing and the educational system and public policy needs to support higher education and employment opportunities to ensure a successful transition to self-sufficiency. Many students who have been identified with ASD are graduating from our educational system and have a myriad of issues navigating life after high school. The parents of these children have identified feeling as if “these students are falling off the cliff” (Autism Speaks, 2012). Many of these young adults stay in school until they are 21; but their transition to educational or training programs, community living, and hopefully employment, are difficult. While in an educational entitlement program, all services are coordinated and centrally located. After graduation, students and their parents have to navigate a completely different set of challenges. There are many agencies and services with which to coordinate in order to create a comprehensive plan; all with their own sets of rules and regulations. The number of children diagnosed with ASD has increased and is thought to be 1 in 88 nationally (Centers for Disease Control, 2012), and 1 in 49 in the state of New Jersey (DHS, 2014). The number has continued to increase since the 1970’s and shows no signs of stopping. These growing numbers of children with ASD are now graduating high school; nationally, approximately 50,000 adolescents with ASD will turn 18 years old this year.

Most students graduate high school and experience the normal rite of passage of further education. For students with ASD the number going on to post high school education or training of any kind is about 40% and very few of them ever complete their intended programs (Shattuck et al., 2012). Nearly 50% of youths with ASD with normal to high IQ are pursuing a post-

secondary educational degree. This percentage is considerably below the average rate of other high school graduates (approximately 62–69% attending college or university, according to the US Department of Education, 2008). This suggests that the pursuit of a college degree is a viable option for many youths with ASD who do not have intellectual deficiencies.

## **Background**

Employment for all young adults had been challenging, especially in the last several years with the nation's economic downturn. A young adult with ASD is even more challenged, particularly due to fewer employment opportunities. Lack of employment decreases their quality of life and puts a tremendous burden on their parents and on society. Employment is what occupies most of an adult's time and energy, it helps identify who we are, provides a social network, helps give us fulfillment, and a means to become independent. With employment, we have other positive outcomes such as increased self-worth, improved happiness and development of relationships. Through meaningful employment we become a valued member of society.

Recent publications paint a bleak picture about the employment future for young adults with ASD. According to one study (McDonough & Revell, 2009), unemployment of disabled adults was high, approximately 70%, but it was even higher with adults with ASD, 85%.

According to Shattuck et al., (2012) an employment study of different groups of disabled young adults; young adults with ASD have a lower rate of employment than those with either speech language impairments or learning disabled and slightly higher than those with low IQ's. They suggest that young adults with ASD have more difficulty finding and keeping employment.

Other researchers have established that only 6%-10% of young adults with ASD are competitively employed (Cedurland, Hagberg, Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg, 2008; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Another study found that young adults with ASD who were employed were

generally underemployed, working part time (approximately 23 hours a week), and made less money than other comparable groups. They also had fewer jobs and less variation in the type of jobs they hold (Roux et al., 2013; Cimera & Cowan, 2009).

The special educational system, proposed by federal law, officially began in 1975 with the passing of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) which placed a strong emphasis on access to educational programs. In 1990, this law was renamed The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and added the category ASD. In 1997, IDEA shifted its focus and was concerned with level educational opportunities for all. While this law has been revised many times, the last revision in 2004 changed the definition of transition services. It requires the educational system to examine post- school activities including post-secondary education, training, employment, community integration and independent living.

The No Child Left Behind Law also effects the emphasis of the educational system, as funding is dependent on standardized test scores, not functional skills. Federal funding is dependent on how well all students take standardized tests. Many teachers instruct their students on the intricacies of standardized test taking, however special education teachers do not; despite their students taking the same state regulated tests. When these students take the standardized tests, despite being provided with accommodations (extra time or an aide), they perform poorly even when they are academically competent (US Department of Education, 2007), because they have not been trained.

### **Current Strategy in New Jersey**

In New Jersey, students are the responsibility of the educational system until the age of 21 and the transition planning begins with the IEP after the student turns 14 and should consider the

student's goals after graduation. Schools are required to evaluate the student's readiness and have one goal on their IEP that addresses transition planning. The educational staff should be working on identification of the student's strengths and interests. By 16, the school will begin formal and informal transition assessments to determine appropriate programming after high school. Employment or continuing education is the goal for most students and needs to be a collaborative process with the student, student's family and outside partners. These partners include: employers, institutions of higher education, specialized training programs, and a wide variety of agencies who will assist with competitive, supportive, or sheltered employment. Two agencies that are integral for these students include the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) and the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVR). DVR helps with job placement, job accommodation, training for specific skills, and job coaching. If an individual needs supported employment opportunities such as a sheltered workshop or a community program they would receive information from DDD.

Unfortunately studies have shown that this system might not be optimal for young adults with ASD. Schools are slowly moving from a strict educational model to including vocational readiness in their programs; but due to the complex and varied issues that students with ASD exhibit, these programs have not been successful. Almost every job requires essential skills that are a challenge to a young adult with ASD; especially all forms of communication, social skills, and flexibility without becoming extremely agitated or frustrated. The state of New Jersey requires young adults with ASD to use the resources of DVR before they use other programs. Vocational rehabilitation services are not always successful with this population. One study found that nearly 6 out of 10 adults with autism who wished to work remained unemployed after completing vocational rehabilitation services. (Cimera & Burgess, 2011). According to Standifer

(2009), many traditional vocational rehabilitation practices are not appropriate for adults with ASD and studies have shown that in some cases vocational rehabilitation was successful in only 10% of the cases started. Adults with ASD are more likely to be denied vocational rehabilitation services because the symptoms of ASD are considered “too severe.” Even when vocational rehabilitation services are rendered, there is sometimes resistance based on cost-effectiveness. It costs more money to support vocational training for adults with ASD than nearly every other disabled population (Lawer, Brusilovskiy, Salzer, & Mandell, 2009).

Another group of young adults with a unique set of difficulties involve those students with ASD who have a high IQ and are involved in a college prep type educational setting. Their educational program emphasizes traditional studies and may not address employment readiness. It has been found that this group of students falls through the cracks, as they do not get supportive services for employment and is unable to be successful on their own. Once graduating from high school, this group is particularly vulnerable to having no activities in the community. According to one study they are 3 times more likely to not be involved with a day program or any type of supportive employment than those with lower IQs. If they found competitive employment, the jobs were part time and involved menial, repetitive, and unskilled tasks (Taylor & Selzer, 2011).

## **Concerns**

To recap, the areas of greatest concern include:

- Poor job market for young adults in general and even poorer for young adults with ASD.
- Employers are not incentivized to create jobs and pay a fair wage for individuals with ASD.

- Educational systems emphasize standardized test scores, especially those linked to funding, over functional life skills.
- In New Jersey, transition planning begins when a student is 14 with the formal transition planning at 16 years of age.
- Educational systems are not structured to provide vocational readiness training or on the job work experiences.
- Cost to support adults with ASD continues to rise.
- State run work programs such as DVR are more successful with those young adults with physical disabilities as compared to those with ASD.
- Many young adults with ASD and a high IQ are placed in college prep courses in high school and do not get vocational readiness training. These individuals have been found to have less community activities as compared to those with a lower IQ.

Changes on the local, state, and national level to facilitate employment, change attitudes and expand continued education would improve the quality of life for young adults with ASD and allow them to fully participate in our society.

### **Recommendations**

- Increase employment opportunities, especially those high paying jobs by incentives to companies that hire adults with ASD.
- Educational system should begin vocational readiness skills at a young age.

- Develop reliable and valid employment readiness assessments to identify areas of need and to be able to use it to determine the effectiveness of vocational readiness programs.
- Develop a program within the education system for students to practice job skills.
- Insure adequate state and federal funding for programs such as DVR and DDD.
- Study ways to decrease the disparity in post-secondary education and employment for those individuals coming from economically disadvantaged areas.
- Post-secondary education needs to determine what services students with ASD require to be successful and improve retention rates. They also need to create a system to involve those students in the services that they have available to them.
- Create job training programs specifically geared to the strengths of young adults with ASD such as software testers and programmers.
- Publicize those programs that are successful in training employers and their employees in dealing with the array of issues that accompany individuals with ASD.
- Change federal funding so public schools are not penalized for providing job readiness skills instead of emphasizing standardized testing.

## **Conclusion**

This ever-growing population of adults with ASD will continue to need support and services, on both the state and federal level. A multi prong approach is the best way to address life after formal education to help adults with ASD gain their independence, secure meaningful employment, and to live a fulfilled life. By addressing secondary and post-secondary education, changing public policy for school funding, getting employers engaged, and maintaining funding

for agencies; these young adults can be productive members of society, help support themselves, and be less of a burden on taxpayers.

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