

V. PART C: EARLY CHILDHOOD TRANSITION

Congress included provisions to ensure that preschool or other appropriate services would be provided to eligible children leaving early intervention at age three. Transition is a multifaceted process to prepare the child and the child's family to leave early intervention services. Congress recognized the importance of coordination and cooperation between the educational agency and the early intervention system by requiring that a specific set of activities occur as part of a transition plan. Transition activities typically include: (1) identification of steps to be taken to prepare the child for changes in service delivery and to help the child adjust to a new setting, (2) preparation of the family (i.e., discussions, training, visitations), and (3) determination of other programs and services for which a child might be eligible. Transition planning for children who may be eligible for Part B preschool services must include scheduling a meeting, with approval of the family, among the lead agency, the educational agency and the family, at least 90 days (with parental permission up to six months) prior to the child's third birthday. Transition of children who are not eligible for special education also includes making reasonable efforts to convene a meeting to assist families in obtaining other appropriate community-based services. For all Part C children, States must review the child's program options for the period from the child's third birthday through the remainder of the school year and must establish a transition plan.

Validation Planning and Data Collection

The Self-Assessment reported that consistent application and implementation of the transition process is not yet fully realized. Areas needing improvement include: (1) regional monitoring findings related to transition are not reported to the State in a timely fashion; (2) transition planning conferences are not consistently convened in a timely manner throughout the State; (3) activities to support the child and family in transition are not included in the IFSPs; and (4) training for non-English speaking families about transition is needed. The public forum participants corroborated the Self-Assessment report findings and added that Local Education Agencies often have separate procedures for transition and this can lead to a breakdown during transition because the Part C system may not be knowledgeable of the Local Education Agencies' procedures.

A. STRENGTH

Collaboration between DHSS and NJSDE

DHSS and NJSDE staff has built an effective collaborative working relationship to improve transition practices throughout the State. For example, staff from both agencies co-present at training events about transition. Networking between the Regional technical assistance staff and Regional preschool special education staff is occurring. A Transition Task Force comprised of parents, advocacy organizations, local education agencies, early intervention providers, Head Start, and State staff worked over two years to produce a family information booklet "Welcome to Transition." The early intervention community and parents reported that this booklet is an extremely useful information tool. More collaboration between the agencies is needed, however, to ensure timely transitions to Part B. (See noncompliance, #2, below.)

B. AREAS OF NON-COMPLIANCE

1. Steps in Transition Planning Not Included on IFSPs

Each IFSP must include steps to be taken to support the transition of the child to preschool special education services or other services, as appropriate. 34 CFR §303.344(h). The steps must include procedures to prepare the child for changes in service delivery, including steps to help the child adjust to and function in a new setting. The regulations also require that IFSPs include steps for discussions with, and training of, parents regarding future placements and other matters related to the child's transition.

DHSS has not ensured that transition planning is implemented for each child and family according to Part C requirements. A system to ensure that children and families are prepared for transition in accordance with their IFSP is not yet in place.

In three counties, service providers, service coordinators, parents, interagency representatives, and administrators reported that steps to prepare the child for their next preschool environment are not delineated on IFSPs. OSEP's review of thirty-four records confirmed that IFSPs do not include these steps. Regional staff stated that the early intervention providers and service coordinators do not have an adequate knowledge of the preschool special education service system or other community services so that individualized preparation for the child's next early childhood program can be implemented.

DHSS and Regional staff stated that training and technical assistance for transition focuses on the procedures for transition and not on the preparation of the child and family. According to State and regional staff, "we need to focus on the art of doing transition" that includes meaningful, individualized preparation of the child and family.

Although the "*Welcome to Transition*" booklet provides excellent general guidance for families, having general information available is not a substitute for information to support a family based on their unique circumstances; therefore, the IFSP team needs to develop unique steps outlined on each IFSP to ensure that families have the support and education they need to make transition smooth and effective. DHSS has plans in place to provide system-wide training and technical assistance to families regarding transition.

2. Transition of Children with Disabilities from Part C to Part B Is Ineffective

Part C requires that children with disabilities exiting Part C experience a smooth and effective transition to Part B, if eligible. Under Part C, §303.148(b)(2)(i) requires, in the case of a child who may be eligible for preschool services under Part B of the Act, with the approval of the child's family, that a conference be convened with the lead agency, the family and the local education agency, at least 90 days before the child is eligible for preschool services to discuss the services the child may receive. OSEP found through a interviews with parents, Part C and B administrators, service coordinators, and service providers that DHSS has not ensured that children and families are experiencing a smooth and effective transition to Part B because

transition planning conferences are not held at least 90 days before the child is eligible for preschool services.

In all four counties visited for Part C, OSEP found that procedures were not in place to involve local education agency personnel in the preschool transition process, including the 90-day transition planning conference. Service coordinators, parents, service providers, interagency representatives, administrators, and regional staff confirmed problems with transition during interviews with OSEP. For example, service coordinators in one county stated that they did not know the names of the school district personnel who should be invited to the 90-day transition planning meeting nor did they know who in their agency was responsible for sending an invitation to the local education agencies to attend a transition meeting; therefore, local education agencies could not participate in planning meetings. In another county, service coordinators reported that, although they sent notices to the school districts about the transition planning meeting, they did not follow up to ensure that school personnel could attend the meetings; therefore, meetings were held without having required personnel and transition planning was delayed. In one area OSEP visited, 6 of the 12 local education agencies did not, although invited, participate in the 90-day transition meeting.

Service coordinators and service providers in one county reported that they believed the varying procedures of each local education agency for transition process inhibit the smooth transition from Part B to Part C. Service coordinators, administrators and regional staff reported that service coordinators have to try to learn each district's specific transition procedures, and, in at least one county, service coordinators must learn the procedures for 72 different local education agencies in order to facilitate transition. For example, one local education agency requires families to travel to the school district to register their child before the transition meeting could take place, while others did not have this requirement.

OSEP found that differences in personnel schedules also resulted in lack of local education agencies' involvement in transition planning meetings. In one county, the Part C program generally tried to schedule transition meetings in the evenings or weekends to accommodate the families' work schedules and, although they invited the school district personnel to the meeting, the school district staff did not have the same flexibility to attend meetings in the evenings or weekends. As a result, school officials could not attend the transition meetings.

State Part C exit data from 1998 and 1999 are one indicator that timely transitions are not occurring prior to the child's third birthday. In these two years, 31% and 26% respectively of the children exiting Part C were awaiting final determinations for special education services at age 3. It is highly likely that a proportion of the children who exited the Part C program and who were awaiting final determinations for special education services would be eligible for special education services at age 3, based on historical trends relayed by the NJ Part C staff, that 80% to 90% of the children exiting Part C qualify for Part B.

DHSS and NJSDE staff acknowledged that, although they believed the State is making significant improvements in the transition between early intervention programs and special education through State-initiated communication and joint technical assistance activities, smooth transitions for children and families from Part C to Part B in all areas of the State are not

occurring. The State staff believed that local "idiosyncrasies" in transition procedures inhibit effective transition. At the time of OSEP's visit, both DHSS and NJSDE were monitoring local transition processes but did not share their findings or improvement plans with each other.

DHSS and NJSDE staff reported to OSEP that they hope to develop methods to conduct joint on-site monitoring activities so that both State agencies, together, could provide guidance to local early intervention programs and school districts. DHSS and NJSDE staff also expressed a need to develop a mechanism to track referrals from Part C to B to ensure that smooth transitions are occurring.

C. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED RESULTS

1. Transition Systems Development

As a result of OSEP's discussions with both DHSS and NJSDE about transition, OSEP suggests that outcomes of transition could be strengthened by: 1) disseminating the transition procedures outlined in DHSS' and NJSDE's Interagency Agreement, when finalized; 2) identifying and disseminating the local contacts responsible for transition in the local Part C and Part B systems; 3) sharing outcomes of monitoring visits; 4) establishing a tracking system to notify the local education agencies of the number of children expected to be referred to special education; 5) developing mechanisms to ensure that families understand transition procedures and have information about special education services and community services, and 6) establishing guidelines in collaboration with NJSDE to streamline the eligibility determination process between early intervention and special education.

2. Family Information

The "*Welcome to Transition*" family information booklet is available in English only. OSEP suggests that the State consider alternative methods for disseminating the information contained in this document to ensure that all families in early intervention have access to this important information.