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**Abstract**

Rosemary Lawn, Managing Director of a Perth supported employment agency, discusses effective school to work transition for people who have high support needs. She presents thoughts by Barbara Wilcox, an American professor who visited Western Australia to help people really look at the issue of transition. Her emphasis was on inclusive education which needs to be community based and futures referenced. The model Wilcox uses is that of samples, select and place, which should start from the first years of high school. Lawn also believes that parents are essential to the role of ensuring effective school to work transition.

**Keyword: Transition**

# **Effective school to work transition**

by Rosemary Lawn

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Rosemary Lawn has just commenced as Managing Director of Intework; a Perth supported employment agency, which assists people with significant disabilities to access integrated, paid employment. She has previously worked with PE Personnel, a competitive employment agency for over six years in the capacity of Manager, Job Supporter, and Managing Director. And she has specific expertise in developing, leading, and managing an employment service, supporting people with disabilities in open employment, staff training and development, equal opportunity and public employment, assisting people with significant disabilities, school to work transition and transition from sheltered to open employment.*

The first thing I am going to talk about is effective school to work transition. I think it is a really good thing that we have actually put this on the program first because working in employment, the base really needs to come from effective schooling for young people with disabilities.

Within Australia we have a really major problem on our hands, where many, many young people are leaving school with a disability each year, and they have nowhere to go. Most young people with a disability at the moment are leaving school to face really, very long periods of unemployment before they get a job, or under-employment.

In Western Australia there was a survey last year, and it's known that over the next three years there is going to be over 500 young people with disabilities, these are known young people's disabilities, leaving school. The maximum state is just over one million. Overall the agencies, the new agencies, and the traditional programs have not got the resources to cope with this. So 500 young people coming out and piling up, is a really major problem. I can't believe that here we are at this point in time with all these young people and we are going to expose them to the likes of nothingness.

In WA we have ACE, the Association for Competitive Employment, and we started about a year before Queensland's open employment forum. We did become aware of one of our critical issues, the transition of young people with disabilities into open employment, which recognised about a year ago. In 1989 ACE took on transition as a major issue, that is the transition of young people with disabilities from school to employment. We decided that we wanted to bring all the participants together, and focus on developing people's skills to make the transition from school to work more effective.

The first thing we did was we planned a conference and we called it 'Schools, Jobs and the Community'. Barbara Wilcock (you might be familiar with her work), is an American Professor who has done a lot of work on school to work transition, came to WA to help us really look at the issue of effective school to work transition.

I'm going to talk about the critical elements that Barbara took us through in that conference and share some of the knowledge that she was able to give at that time.

The first concept that Barbara gave us was that effective school to work transition is basically a bridge. It's a bridge, which has got a very strong foundation in education, it's a planning process, which is the actual bridge, and it's having another strong foundation in employment in adult life. So, you've got to have the foundation in education, a foundation with having something to go to in adult life, employment and other options, and a planning process that makes the transition effective for each individual. What's happening at the moment is that for a lot of people, there's no bridge and they just fall into the chasm in between. If somebody makes a successful transition from school to employment, it's more by good chance, than by effective planning, and ensuring that there is solid foundations on both sides of the bridge.

Firstly, let's go to education. The things that we really talked a great deal about when going through the process, was that we thought schools can do an awful lot for young people with disabilities to ensure that they are well prepared for their adult life. However, the most major things that I got out of what Barbara was telling us; was that school education needs to be integrated. That's where, in integrated schools, young people learn the social skills that they require to be part of the normal community. The curriculum that they are involved with needs to be community based and futures referenced. So we

need to teach young people the skills of working while they are still at school, the skills of looking after themselves, the skills of being able to get around the community.

I won't go through in a lot of detail the points that Barbara covered because there is too many here. But just to highlight a couple of them. One of the situations that we had in WA was that if you went to a special school you could stay there until you are 18 years old, but if you went to an education support unit or centre (which is a bit like a special class, a unit within a school), and you're main stream, you have to leave school at 15 or 16 years old. Kids with disabilities in WA, if they were mainstream, didn't have the right to stay on until they were Year 12. So that was one of the things that Barbara said, that they have the same rights to education as everybody else. If they choose to leave school when they are 15 and 16 years old that's OK, but the system shouldn't make them leave just because there is nowhere else for them to go. The only way they could stay on until they are 18 years old was by then going to a special school.

Overall it really came through to me very strongly, that if we want kids to be part of regular community, ordinary life, they have to be educated in regular communities and ordinary schools. This is the main one, that young people need to be educated in a regular school campus. Education opportunities which are close to home so they should be going to school in local communities, that's where they get to know their friends, that's where they can get to know people that are going to end up working in the same area. Attention needs to be paid to the state of the student in the school and the social network. There needs to be social curriculum, especially in preparation for a job, and focus on self-management life skills, and involvement of parents and family.