

**DISPATCH EXCLUSIVE / HELP WANTED: JOBS FOR THE DISABLED
AFTER SCHOOL, THEN WHAT?**

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Published: Tuesday, May 24, 2011

Edition: Home Final

Section: News

Page: 1A

As a preschooler, Daniel Coffey drove the wheels off his battery-powered car. His parents wrote the manufacturer for spare parts, again and again, so that their youngest son -- autistic, obsessive-compulsive and afflicted with a dash of Tourette's syndrome -- could perfect his parallel parking.

That stubborn focus provided early clues about how much Daniel loved to master a task.

"He wants to get things just right," said his mom, Venta. "Daniel appreciates a job well done."

The Canal Winchester family worked for years to nurture his interests and abilities, then jumped at the chance to involve Daniel in an intensive employment-training program. Coffey, who is 21, will be graduating in June.

"It's like he's already had a bunch of little internships," Mrs. Coffey said.

Schools are required to prepare "**transition** plans" for Ohio students with developmental disabilities. But few students are in such top-notch programs -- which make them much more likely to be employed after they move into the adult world, advocates and researchers say.

According to a sample survey of Ohio students with multiple disabilities who graduated between 2005 and 2009, just 1 in 6 reported receiving on-the-job training in school, said Robert Baer of the Center for Innovation in **Transition** and Employment at Kent State University.

Those young adults, however, appear "about four times as likely to be working from 20 to 34 hours per week," said Baer, who collects post-secondary information on students with disabilities for the Ohio Department of Education.

The success rate is probably even higher for the small group of students enrolled in college-based pilot programs, such as the one Coffey attends through the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio and Ohio State University, Baer said. Those efforts combine class work, social skills and so much job training that a student with Down syndrome or other significant developmental disabilities can graduate with a hefty portfolio of job experience and a resume.

"You have pockets of excellence," said Margo Izzo, professor and program director at OSU's Nisonger Center, which serves children and adults with developmental disabilities. "The question is: How do we move from these model and pilot programs to where the best options are delivered for all students?"

Money, cooperation and a lack of leadership get in the way.

Few ideal pathways

The pilot program Coffey attends at Ohio State costs his home school district, Canal Winchester, about \$20,000 a year.

Good job-training programs operating within districts require low teacher-to-student ratios, ideally no more than 1 to 12, "and that's awfully tough to come by," Baer said.

On top of the budget challenges, successful **transition** services require large bureaucracies to cooperate. But the state Department of Education, Department of Developmental Disabilities and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services can neither tell one another what to do nor share student data.

That makes it difficult for pilot efforts to take root as statewide policy, officials acknowledge.

"We know it's an issue, and we're trying to make steps," said Leslie Paull, manager of economic and employment development at the state Department of Developmental Disabilities.

The danger is that young people with developmental disabilities will get stuck when moving from school-based services to the adult system, where employment help is not a given and eligibility requirements differ. When **transition** efforts don't go well, young people are more likely to be idle or end up segregated with other disabled workers, experts say.

"I really want to see the engagement, the leadership, at the state level" to set goals and streamline processes, said Lynnae Ruttledge, commissioner of the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration. "There aren't enough created pathways."

A few generations ago, sheltered workshops for disabled people were considered among the most innovative options for families seeking productive lives for their sons and daughters. Today, more families aim higher, striving for a job in the community when possible.

"They do not want to see their children isolated," said Michael Kirkman, executive director of Ohio Legal Rights Service, an independent state agency that advocates for people with disabilities.

Advocates say the best way to staunch the flow to workshops is not to send people there in the first place. Of the 21,000 developmentally disabled Ohioans who receive services from their county boards and hold a job, seven of 10 work in sheltered settings alongside other disabled workers.

"It's pretty clear that Ohio is still dependent on segregated employment," Kirkman said, "and a lot of that has to do with **transition**."

What option is right?

Venta Coffey had tried to picture her son in the best workshop she could imagine. Coffey's challenges are many, and she knew employment might not come easily. She wanted to be realistic.

"I used to think, 'Was he only going to be able to sit at a table and do the same thing over and over?'" Mrs. Coffey said. "I don't know. Because that is the right thing for some people."

The sheltered workshops are forgiving and accepting, sparing young people the stress and shame that can bear down when a job in the community proves too much. If a developmentally disabled person isn't up to working on a particular day, the sheltered option allows him to do other activities.

Many sites also provide a bustling and satisfying social scene. But Daniel Coffey has found a path that won't isolate him from the broader community.

"We're just looking for him to be happy," Mrs. Coffey said. "To work and make a little money and live."

Her son now has a Project Plus internship at OSU's Recreation and Physical Activity Center, where he folds towels and vacuums straight lines into the carpet with as much determination as he once parked his toy car.

Kathy Kuhns, a **transition** specialist at the Educational Service Center who works with Coffey and about 25 other students in the center's job-training programs, beams when she talks about the changes she's seen in helping disabled people.

"I've been through deinstitutionalization, mainstreaming, and now I work to make sure these kids have options other than to go to the workshop," she said.

Special-education resource rooms and sheltered workshops aren't necessarily good training for students who want to learn how to function in the larger community.

"I refer to it as picking up a professional posture, which they do here," she said. "You're raising the bar. We're training them to interact, to problem-solve. The work is the tool."

Planning for life

Schools are supposed to produce a personal, ongoing plan for disabled students that describes what each is likely to need to be successful with post-high school activities such as education, employment and independent-living skills. A **transition** document is required under the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

In Ohio, planning is to begin at age 14 and get more specific at age 16 about the services that may be needed.

State education officials say basic compliance isn't the issue. Of the nearly 70,000 Ohio students age 16 or older who require **transition** components in their education plans, more than 99 percent have such plans.

The issue is quality: Many families complain that the documents are boilerplate that isn't matched with the joint effort it takes for parents, educators and social workers to chart a course.

"It's getting schools to not just think of it as a termination process -- get 'em through," said Lawrence Dennis, a consultant for the Ohio Department of Education's Office for Exceptional Children. "That's a cultural shift in thinking."

Early assessments of the plans were not encouraging, the department's Tom Lather said recently during a presentation to the Ohio Disability Employment Alliance.

"What we found out initially is that the **transition** plans were not very good," he said. "It's much better, and it's getting better."

Even the best plans hinge on a cumbersome alliance of agencies. "There are so many people involved, and so many agencies," said Claudia Ross of the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities. "That's got to be the most frustrating thing for families. A lot of players, a lot of meetings."

And yet the agencies, because of Ohio privacy laws, can't line up databases "and speak to each other about our kids," Lather said. "The state legislature has thrown up roadblocks about what kind of data we can handle. We have to get over that kind of stuff."

'Does somebody care?'

Families have to push, too. Lena Meerman wouldn't be happily working at the Nisonger dental clinic a few hours each day -- and earning \$8.50 an hour -- if her dad and her classroom teacher had listened to high-school officials who said she belonged in a sheltered workshop.

"It's easy," Meerman, who is 22, said of her job sterilizing dental instruments. "And plus, I know the routine by heart now. I like the people here."

Bill Meerman's voice rises when he recounts the "failure of imagination" that nearly kept his daughter from landing a job that has allowed her to grow beyond their dreams.

"Lena was very quickly getting to the point to where she was going to fall through the cracks," the Upper Arlington man said. "Now her chest is puffed up; she has confidence. Lena's a thoroughbred out of the gate."

Dennis said students who move on to fulfilling lives often have determined advocates. "One of the most critical variables is, 'Does somebody care?'"

Ruttledge, the federal commissioner, said there's broad agreement that **transition** services belong at the forefront of disabilities-employment policy.

"Most of the discussion now is, 'Let's focus on **transition** and youth,'" she said during a recent trip to Columbus. "They see themselves as being employed. Young people have taken a bite of that apple."

Daniel Coffey's next planned stop is a supported job in the community -- he's not yet ready to work alone for hours at a time -- earning the full minimum wage. He loves to mow and likely will take a spot on a landscaping crew. Coffey also has begun meeting with potential roommates to share an apartment.

Sometimes, it's all a bit overwhelming, and he gets cranky, longing for a road trip with his brother or a visit to a thrift store "so I can buy a bunch of crap I don't really need."

But Coffey admits to feeling better when he has a job to do.

"I love doing laundry," he said as he loaded an industrial dryer -- stopping to show off the giant lint bin -- at Ohio State. "My mom says I like it so much that I'd wash all the time. Whether the clothes are dirty or not."