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Web-Based Transitioning for Students with Disabilities: Learning from Existing Limitations to Design a Process that Leaves No Child Behind

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Web-Based Transitioning for Students with Disabilities:
Learning from Existing Limitations to Design a Process that
Leaves No Child Behind

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

Kevin Johnson

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ABSTRACT

Web-Based Transitioning for Students with Disabilities:
Learning from Existing Limitations to Design a Process that
Leaves No Child Behind

May 2005

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Directed by Peter Taylor

Students with disabilities face numerous obstacles. This is especially true while in the process of postsecondary transitioning, moving from secondary (K-12) to Post-secondary schooling (College, University or Community College). The transitioning process poses obstacles to all students however students with disabilities confront additional obstacles unique to having a disability. Federal law mandates public secondary schools design transition plans, a written plan detailing students' transition from secondary to postsecondary school. Secondary schools must also create opportunities for students to develop both academic and life skills critical to successfully take the postsecondary leap and remain successful at the postsecondary level. The need for effective and efficient transition planning has become critical for these students in an era of revised public higher education admissions standards and more stringent K-12 learning standards. This climate has placed increasing demands on the educators responsible for facilitating the transitioning process; rendering the development and writing of transition plans outdated, incomplete and ineffective. This problem with transition plans has led me to consider an alternative approach—the subject of this synthesis.

To help facilitate a solution I have designed a proposal that remains in progress for the development of a web-based application that I call, The Transition Portal with the following objectives:

- Organize the transition planning process allowing schools to monitor those students of highest risk.

- Provide educators the means to actively write transition plans that represent the goals and interests of the student over an extended period of time.

- Give transition plans the ability to travel with the student throughout their educational careers allowing critical information to be transferred and revised by educators that work with a particular student from middle school on through to post-secondary institutions.

Such a process will allow for the process to develop along with the student's own development. The flexibility associated with web-based application creates a platform that will assist in the coordination of services with external agencies. Many external agencies currently assist schools in the distribution of critical services ensuring that those students most in need and most at risk receive critical support during an important phase in their lives. The overall goal of this project is to help improve student and teacher productivity and empowerment. The proposal for the implementation of The Transition Portal is intended for use with students who might otherwise be left to fall through the cracks.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> One way in which I am at variance with progressive education
> becomes apparent when we turn from criticizing school to
> inventing new methods. (Papert 1993, 14)

Throughout the last six years I have been working within the Boston Public schools for a Federal

TRIO Talent Search program called Project REACH providing specialized academic support

services to students with disabilities. In this capacity I have witnessed the struggles of students

in a system that until very recently, assumed that special education students were not college

bound and national education statistics reflect this. The data suggests that secondary schools are

insufficiently addressing the long-term needs of students with disabilities.

In 1996 Mary M. Wagner and Jose Blackorby, in an article titled, Transition from High

School to Work or College: How Special Education Students Fare, found that "only 27% of

youths with disabilities had been enrolled in postsecondary school," even up to five years after

graduating from high school. Despite being published nearly ten years ago, the reality is that

these statistics have changed little.

In 2002 the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education found that

students with disabilities drop out of high school at twice the rate of their peers, and that

enrollment rates of students with disabilities in higher education are 50 percent lower than

enrollment rates among the general population. Public secondary schools are failing these

students for a number of reasons, which I will discuss later in this proposal. I have isolated one

issue students with disabilities face in secondary schools that I believe can be redesigned to

better prepare these students for the postsecondary level.

My own research and experience working in the Boston Public school system has shown me that a critical problem in public, urban secondary schools is that students have essentially been taken out of the transitioning process. I was faced with this reality last fall when working with a senior I'll call Johnny. He was thinking about applying to community colleges in the Boston area. He asked me to meet with him individually to discuss some of his options in this regard. Prior to our meeting I retrieved a copy of his transition plan, which was on file in the Special Education office. The plan had been written his junior year (Appendix 1). Up to this point I had only limited conversations with him about his goals but I knew that he was passionate about writing and a well-known member of the poetry club at school, so I was surprised to read in his transition plan, "Johnny will graduate and become a police officer."

When I showed him this and asked him about the statement, he said, "I wanted to be a police officer in like the 8th grade, but now (12th grade) I want to go to college and study journalism, I really want to become journalist." This exhibits a fundamental problem with the management of transition planning for students with disabilities. The long-term goals of students recorded in 8th grade transition plans are not typically referred to or updated to see if in fact these students career goals have remained constant, or as is most often the case, change with the students' own growth and development.

A students' vision statement is an essential part of the overall transition plan because it gives teachers and guidance counselors an idea of what the students' long-term goals are. Yet because the process to update these plans is prohibitively time consuming the vision the student had in the 8th grade is what stays on file until the student graduates. The problem is that the student in his/her senior year is not the same student that gave that statement in 8th grade. As is

typical, with young people their vision and goals often change by junior or senior year in high school. On the surface this problem is one of many with the transitioning process but it is significant particularly when viewed in light of the dire statistics I referred to earlier. There is no mechanism to help focus and direct the students transition plan and the interactions that are geared to helping the student move toward his/her future goals; the goal of this project is to individually tailor the students' needs at the secondary level to ensure that they leave school with needed skills and a plan to help realize these goals.

We do students an injustice when they graduate from secondary school without the active participation and knowledge needed to thrive outside of the environment they have spent a majority of their young lives in. Seymour Papert, creator of the software program Logo and author of The Children's Machine: Rethinking School In the Age of the Computer (1993) spoke about education in terms of schools "casting the child in the role of passive recipient of knowledge." This is similar to the manner in which services are provided to students with disabilities, sometimes whether the services are needed or not. The process of transition planning is dictated to the student. Instead of accepting that there is some intrinsic value in allowing the student structured time to explore and develop a path toward his/her goal.

Transition plans were originally designed to enable the school to develop learning opportunities that engage the student in developing a plan of action for how to attain a goal. Yet the static nature of these plans don't allow for revision or monitoring of the students goals. This makes creating dialogue around the student's goals difficult to initiate. The goal of this proposal is to create a new, technologically upgraded method for providing the student with active and structured engagement through the use of The Transition Portal. The hope is that this will refocus the student as the subject of the transitioning process.

The most effective ways of supporting students during the transitioning process is to encourage the student to set goals and carefully plan the steps that will help them reach these goals. Follow up is necessary to hold the student accountable and to give them the opportunity to report on progress. The Transition Portal is a tool designed to enable school personnel to adjust, coordinate, and organize transition plans. It will provide the student with direct access to the transition plan and its contents. The Transition Portal will allow time and space to periodically engage students who are in the most need while creating autonomy and giving students more responsibility to explore their options and develop a plan that fits. Providing the student with information and resources will be an added level of support during the stressful transitioning process.

The problems with transition plans are numerous. Some involve structural obstacles in public education in an era of high stakes testing. I will review these, but I will not claim my approach can overcome them. Other problems invite us to devise more effective and efficient ways of transition support. Currently, teachers and guidance counselors are overwhelmed with sizeable caseloads and paper work, legally required for all students with disabilities. External agencies are available and willing to provide critical academic support services to help schools students with the transition process but often these students at highest risk and with the most need for such services are never connected with these agencies.

The idea for this proposal developed while thinking about the possibility of incorporating technology into the transitioning process. It occurred to me that many of the structural obstacles are organizational in nature. It is important to be able to distribute information, coordinate services and communicate with those involved in a way that is efficient and timely. Digital media technology can overcome the limitations of the traditional instructional format that has

been used for nearly two decades to facilitate the transitioning of students with disabilities.

My work in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program encouraged me to work with technology, specifically web design and multi-media technology. I began learning how to produce and design web sites and then began to develop my own sites. This combined with my work with students with disabilities introduced me to the idea of accessible web design. Accessible web sites are designed and written in ways that assure that all users can access and benefit from the content. The skills and awareness that I developed led my wife, who is a software designer, and me to start a small business called Pinksoft.net, which provides graphic and web design services. One of the reasons we started Pinksoft.net was because we saw a tremendous need to ensure that web content was accessible to all and that there was a need to provide this service to individuals, small businesses, community organizations, non-profit organizations and even Political Candidates (we designed the site for Linda Dorcena Forry who recently won the Massachusetts 12th Suffolk District State Representative seat). All of this experience convinced me that a web-based software application could be developed to assist all those involved in the transitioning process of students with disabilities.

In the following chapters I discuss some of the obstacles facing students with disabilities as a result of the ineffectiveness of transition plans. I also provide an overview of how transition plans are written within the overall development of the Individualized Education Program or IEP—based on information collected during the comprehensive assessment, is developed by a group of individuals knowledgeable about the student (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). Then I will describe the underlying ideas and concepts that highlight the need for The Transition Portal and more effective way of writing and managing transition plans. The Transition Portal is accessible via the Internet at, http://webforeveryone.org/ and will improve access to this

information and will enable teachers to create and direct students' learning opportunities in the transitioning process. The Transition Portal will provide the template for educators to use in various educational settings so that they can focus on facilitation of the process. I will employ examples from my own unique position and role in assisting students with disabilities during this process to emphasize how The Transition Portal can be beneficial to educators in the Boston schools, their special needs students, parents and the various external agencies who are eager to provide specialized academic support services and disability related services that schools are currently unable to provide.

Development

With the assistance and guidance of my wife, I began to develop a prototype to help write about the process for this proposal. The prototype, though rough has allowed me to see the possibilities of this project and to begin to think about the needs that must be addressed by The Transition Portal. While I have a functional knowledge about the accessible aspect of web design I was unfamiliar with usability, specifically usability by students with a variety of disabilities that causes them to process information differently. It is important to think about the ways in which these students read and process information in designing an application that is useful and helpful in addressing their needs. I have voraciously read books that deal with children and computers. One source of information that has been very helpful in the development of this idea was, Technology @ Your Fingertips, Version 2.0 (January 2001) it outlined the process for getting the best possible technology solution for any educational organization. The insight I gained from this publication gave me an understanding of the requirements to develop a technology solution to meet the needs of my organization Project

REACH and TRIO programs more generally but this solution is something that I hope can help

secondary schools, students and parents.

CHAPTER 2

TRANSITION PLANNING

Prior to working directly with special needs students I hadn't given much thought to transition planning. As a regular education senior in high school I was given the typical transitioning support from guidance, interested teachers and my parents. I filled out several college applications, wrote essays, took the SAT, filed my financial aid application and waited for acceptance and or rejection letters. It sounds easy now, but I do remember it being a stressful experience. Preparing for life after high school can be a challenging endeavor for all students. To be clear, transitioning is the planning process that occurs when a student is preparing to leave school and begin adult life. There are several basic elements to consider in the transitioning process. The student must know and be able to verbalize his/her career and educational interests and goals. A decision must be made about where to go to school or work. Then living and transportation arrangements must be made. The reality is that students with disabilities must deal with these basic elements and challenges of transitioning along with an entire dimension of transitional issues unique to having a disability.

Obstacles

The obstacles facing students with disabilities are daunting. Despite the successes brought about by disability rights laws, students with disabilities continue to face numerous obstacles, academic, social, and economic that affect every aspect of their lives. Social stigma and low expectations of students with disabilities remain and continue to limit the access and acceptance of these students.

The factors limiting students with disabilities' access to, and successful completion of post-secondary education are a complex cycle of events putting them on a path of continued difficulty, frustration, and ultimately failure. Once a student with a disability is set on this path it is very difficult make a correction. There is no time to make an adjustment because curriculum planning is held to a grueling schedule in the current climate of increased accountability and standards.

In the rush to implement the federal No Child Left Behind Act and other standards-based-improvements in public education; educational policy became yet another obstacle to students with disabilities and their successful transitioning. On September 28, 2005 The Boston Globe reported that, "a quarter of the state's schools are failing to measure up under federal standards, mostly because special education students are faltering on the state's standardized tests."

While the increased standards have shed light on many of the problems facing students with disabilities, the pressure to show results has pushed many of these concerns aside. One problem area that has suffered as a result is transition preparation and providing students with the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge that will assist them in the transition from school to adult life. According to educational researchers Morningstar and Kleinhammer-Tramill (1999) finding support and sustaining employment, living independently, and attaining post-secondary education and training are critical. However, these needs are not addressed by the federal standards. As a special educator my focus is not only on developing students academic skills but also on the students' desired post-school outcomes. The Transition Portal has separate tracking tabs for addressing these critical support needs based upon the students future goals (Appendix 3). These tabs include 3 tracks, college, career, and a

trade/apprenticeship tab. This provides the student the ability to look at the steps needed to work toward realizing these goals.

<u>Boston Public Schools Current Transition Practice</u>

The Boston Public Schools write Transition Plans within the larger development of Individualized Education Programs (IEP)—the description of services planned for students with disabilities. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) IEP's are required. A Team of teachers, guidance counselors and specialists are assembled to formulate these plans for each student receiving Special Education services. Conceptually IEP's create educational planning based upon the needs of the student. Once the various academic, behavioral, or social needs are identified, then goals need to be written to address these needs (Smith et al., 2004). Within the IEP an entire section devoted to long term planning and goals called, "Transition Services" (Appendix 2) is used to provide the school staff and the student direction and guidance in their roles and responsibilities in the process.

Transition plans are a small but critical part of the larger IEP, critical because they are used to direct the Team's attention toward the student's future needs related to post-secondary career, educational and social goals. According to the Boston Public Schools <u>IEP Process Guide</u>, "The ultimate goal for all students with disabilities is independence and productive lives" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). The first step in the development of the Transition Plan is the writing of the vision statement (Appendix 1).

The vision statement is used to direct the Team's attention toward, future goals of the student. The vision statement is typically written in the 8th grade or when the student reaches the age of 14, or whichever occurs first. For younger students the vision statement is designed to

project over a shorter time span; this requires adults to take a "more active role in developing the vision statement." The vision statement also "aids the Team in determining the student's transition needs, transition goals and transition services" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). A section of this importance needs to be written and revisited, 8th grade is too early for most students to accurately project what their future goals are. As they approach graduation where more concrete decisions are made about future direction these plans typically change. Thus it makes sense to re-evaluate these plans periodically but specifically closer to the student's time of graduation.

As the student approaches graduation his/her graduation status must be considered along with the possibility of referral for chapter 688 services (services from adult human services agencies) and the involvement of adult service agencies (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). Other service agencies include Educational Opportunity programs like Project REACH. There are numerous agencies external to the schools that are equipped to provide students with disabilities specialized academic support services. These services are beneficial and necessary during the transitioning process and not marketed well within the majority of public high schools. The commitment of students is important but the commitment of the community at large is required "to help students reach their visions and be active participants and contributors to society" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). The referral of students to outside agencies can help to expose students with disabilities to the community. This can affect long held stereotypical perceptions of the disabled. The coordination of these services tends to be not very well organized, causing many students to miss out on these much-needed services.

The improvement of the communication and coordination of these services is critical to

ensuring that students receive the support that they need, and many of these services continue to provide support even after the student has left the high school. I have looked up students IEP's and transition plan's on numerous occasions and am shocked when I find that Project REACH is written in the "Needed Transitional Services," section this often is the first time I am aware that our Program's been designated as the responsible party for a specific aspect of a students transitioning. If I had not noticed this note on the transition plan I never would have been aware that this was the case. We typically are referred to students by guidance or one of the students' teachers. On occasion we are written into the plan but not notified of this arrangement. More often than not no one informs us that this is the case. An idea that I am developing for The Transition Portal is an e-mail confirmation that would notify the supporting agency of their role in a given students transition plan. This would also include an RSS feed option when updates happen so that this information is put into a database of changes made. An RSS-aware program can check the feed for changes and react to the changes in an appropriate way so that if an agency were designated to handle a particular aspect of a students' transition plan, The Transition Portal could immediately send out an email to notify the agency.

As well as a confirmation page where an agent of the supporting agency could confirm that they are aware of the arrangement made for services and could post their contact information for the school, students, and parents for easy accessibility to these resources. Increasing access to information for the responsible parties in the transitioning process is one of the main benefits of The Transition Portal. The roles and responsibilities of participants in the transitioning process were important to consider in the initial design and development of The Transition Portal.

The roles and responsibilities of the team as defined by the Association of Higher

Education and Disability (AHEAD) are as follows:

- A student's parent/s or guardian/s - have both the greatest interest in and responsibility for transition planning. They are the decision makers who determine which services their child will need and make a choice among various program options. Parent values and expectations, as well as their level of information concerning the current adult service environment, will influence the transition services for their son or daughter. The parents' role in transition planning is that of informed consumers; the more information they possess, the better their decisions will be concerning their son or daughter's adult life.

- Student - Students are also involved in planning their transition from school to adult life. Their interests, needs and desires should determine which service programs are selected and when goals and targets are established for development and maintenance of activities

- School - The responsibility of the school is to provide effective preparation for post-school life. In addition to preparing students, schools must also take some responsibility for training parents / guardians to deal successfully with the post-school services, and for facilitating the flow of information between parents and adult service organizations or post-secondary education agencies.

- Adult Service Organization- The role of adult services in transition planning is primarily one of consultant. They should provide enough information about service options so that both parents and teachers can adequately plan for a student's transition. When students are two years away from graduation, the local vocational rehabilitation case manger may begin to attend ITP meetings, as appropriate. By participating in planning for student's transition, adult service organizations will develop a base of information, which will allow them to predict the types, amount and quality of services required for future

services. There will be some students who may not access adult service organizations but directly enter postsecondary education (Association of Higher Education and Disability, 1995).

The roles listed above are ideal for the various actors involved in the process. The actual practice in the Boston Public schools is less than ideal because of the overwhelming number of students in comparison to the school staff available to support them. Thinking about the roles of those involved in the transitioning process has helped me to develop The Transition Portal so that it will be useful to those involved.

A General Needs Assessment

Since I have long established working relationships with many people involved in the special education departments of many Boston Public schools it was easy for me access those involved in the transitioning process. I conducted a general needs assessment based on the existing structure of transition planning in the Boston Public schools. One of my primary contacts, Mrs. Mendez was a former Special needs teacher at the Gavin Middle School in South Boston. She currently serves there as an Evaluation Team Facilitator (ETF), responsible for the coordination of IEP (Individualized Education Program) and ITP (Individualized Transition Program) meetings as well as overseeing the development of these plans. She has had the unique opportunity of working on both sides of the transition process, teaching special needs students for nineteen years before becoming an ETF.

After explaining my idea for The Transition Portal to assist students and schools during the process I asked Mrs. Lynn Mendez which aspects of the information currently provided in the Transition Plan and IEP that were important during the transitioning process. She concurred

with my premise that the transition plan as it is currently used was not at all that helpful. She cautioned that they still contained some vital information but questioned how or even if they were used after she develops and writes the plan around the eighth grade for most of her students. The "strengths of the transition plan are the key evaluation, which gives the students high school an idea about the child. This and the comments section provide information that will help to devise a plan and allow for follow through." This struck me when I thought back to Johnny's vision statement and the lack of follow through with this statement into his high school career. It occurred to me that these plans travel with the student conceptually for example the plans do go with the student to the high school where they are filed in the special education office however little in the way of action is taken in terms of follow through or updating these plans. When I mentioned this to Mrs. Mendez she replied, "it (transition plan) should travel with student this is the purpose." The frequency with which these plans are utilized at the high school level raise other questions, which I will address later. These questions hinge on the role of guidance counselors at the high school level.

During a meeting with Mrs. Mendez in her large, rectangular office I couldn't help but notice the large piles of paper work on her desk, a conference table and even on top of her filing cabinets. Her job, and that of guidance counselors is too often that of "paper pushers,"-- language I have heard many guidance counselors and even teachers' use in the past and they refer to the ever increasing demands placed upon these two positions within schools. They often also speak of the need to cut down on paper work and develop more organization to control the process. One answer would be to give students more of a role and responsibility for transitioning. This is the most essential party involved in developing the transition plan and this party is not being heard. While the laws and practice call for student participation this input is

inevitably left out of the decision-making process. Ultimately it is the student's goals that are central to creating a transition plan that will benefit the attainment of these goals. The overall success of any transition plan will depend on how invested the student is in attaining his/her goals.

Guiding Principles

Another one of my primary contacts, Dr. Deborah Merriam serves as a Special Education Guidance counselor at West Roxbury high school. When I spoke with Dr. Merriam she was quite interested in the idea because she had recently completed an on-line Masters Program in On-line Education Technology. Dr. Merriam has also served as the liaison to Project REACH at West Roxbury High school for the past twelve years and during that time has been our principal supporter and resource within the school. I knew that her input would be helpful for this project. In meeting with her I realized that my idea was for a kind of virtual transitioning plan.

Dr. Merriam raised the typical shortcomings that she saw with the current system, transition plans were inaccessible to students, parents, the more engaged teachers and guidance counselors would keep a copy but many did not. She also felt that it was important to give students a copy so that they were aware that many decisions had been reached in regards to their future plans, though she acknowledged that this wasn't the most ideal approach. She preferred that students be involved from the very start and be given a more central role throughout the process though she acknowledged this was a challenging task. For one Dr. Merriam is responsible for the guidance services of 345 students, twenty-five students more than she is supposed to serve according to state regulations. She is one of the more hands on guidance counselors that I have worked with throughout the city and her energy is unyielding.

Dr. Merriam's interest in utilizing technology to include students and parents in the process clearly stems in some part from her large caseload. She cited a plan by the Boston Public Schools to creating an on-line "community of 110,000 participants" that will ultimately include all of the Boston Public Schools 60,000 students, the 40,000 members of their families, and the Boston Public Schools' 10,000 teachers and administrators. My BPS, which will take five years to complete and has yet to be fully funded will allow for parent to participate more directly in their child's education by providing electronic access to homework, report cards and communication with teachers. Upon investigation of this project I found that there have been numerous obstacles to the progress of this initiative, mainly funding and infrastructure.

The Boston Foundation sited many challenges to the state of Massachusetts and city of Boston in terms of incorporating technology into educational settings. The foundation sited many public schools in the state of Massachusetts "lag behind those of most other states in computer and Internet access." The state also "provides fewer funds for teacher training in the use of technology." The biggest challenge sited was the digital divide separating low from high-income residents and whites/Asians from blacks/Latinos in access to technology (The Boston Foundation, Boston Indicators Report, 2002).

The obstacles standing in the way of incorporating technology into schools poses similar obstacles to the creation of The Transition Portal. The Transition Portal cannot help overcome these obstacles however it doesn't require expensive new investments in hardware or network capacity. The current inventory of hardware and network capacity of the schools I have visited would be sufficient. The Transition Portal will provide another option for students and parents that desire more control over the process. My conversation with Dr. Merriam about My BPS reaffirmed my idea because The Transition Portal attempts to attain many of the same goals in

terms of getting students and parents more involved in education process. This exchange

brought me to the realization that regular education students could also benefit from The

Transition Portal because all students need assistance during the transitioning process. The

overall goal is to provide students with a tool that can provide a sense that they are in control of

their futures.

One of the questions that I had about transition plans that still nagged me was, why does

something deemed important enough to warrant the amending of federal law end up in a filing

cabinet where it is unable to fully develop and is easily forgotten? For an answer to this question

I contacted another one of my primary contacts, Dr. Bob Stodden, Director of the Center On

Disability Studies at the University of Hawaii. Dr. Stodden suggested that, "the transition piece

often takes a back seat to what states believe is the real required pieces of the IEP, this renders

lost the intent of the transition piece" (Stodden, 2005). While I agree with Dr. Stodden that

states have overemphasized the importance of the IEP and have come to the conclusion that

transition plans are underutilized because its current form is limited in its ability to offer more

vital and timely information. Transition plans currently are plans in name only, they do not offer

a plan for the student, parents, guidance counselors or external agencies to follow nor do they

have the ability to help coordinate services. This is regrettable because transition plans were

designed to offer some valuable information and can be very helpful, yet the current state of

transition plans has caused them to lose relevance.

Secondary Education Experience: Project REACH

The insights I have gained working with Project REACH have been instrumental in the development of The Transition Portal. The Project was first funded in September of 1985 and at that time became the first Talent Search Program in the nation to serve low-income, urban youth with disabilities. The Project remains a national model for the successful inclusion of youth with disabilities in TRIO Programs—these Programs are funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and are referred to as the TRIO Programs (initially just three programs) now have a total of seven. TRIO Programs help students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education. It is within this Project that I have been given the opportunity to develop programs and services that benefit more than 600 student participants annually. I have developed numerous summer and after-school academic enrichment programs as well as postsecondary transitioning programs within the high schools. These services and programs are only a few of the many that Project REACH provides.

Project REACH provides a wide range of services that are specifically targeted towards middle and high school students within five target high schools (Burke, Dorchester, Madison Park, West Roxbury and Horace Mann) and five targeted middle schools (Gavin, Martin Luther King, McCormack, Horace Mann, and the New Boston Pilot School). The Majority of services are provided on-site at the target schools within a classroom setting though some of the services are provided in one-on-one counseling and advising sessions. My colleagues and I have worked extensively in the research and design of Post-secondary Transitioning models for students with

disabilities to help ensure that REACH participants are equipped with the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in their lives after high school. This has allowed me to observe the progression of students as they move from middle school, to high school and beyond. In many cases I am able to maintain contact with students as they move from one of our target middle schools to one of our target high schools and this connection and my interactions with students has allowed me to observe what obstacles they typically encounter during these transitions leading up to the much larger post-secondary transition. This is the most important factor that has contributed to the Project's success and forced me to think about how it contributes to increasing the chances of students with disabilities successfully transitioning onto the post-secondary level. It occurred to me that my role of providing close academic support to students over their entire secondary school experience has much to do with this.

My unique role and the opportunity to develop relationships with students through the 12th grade and beyond give me a clear picture of the student's abilities, characteristics, interests and goals. I develop a much better understanding of a student's goals because of these relationships. I then create opportunities for them to make choices, take risks, and develop the self-determination skills required at the post-secondary level. This model is difficult to recreate in public schools for a lack of time and resources. The Transition Portal is a clear alternative that will allow for a clear record of a students progress to be easily accessible and transferable between middle and high school. I believe this can all be done without encouraging students to be dependent upon the school to take charge in this process.

One of the issues with current transitioning practice according to Michael L. Wehmeyer (1992) is that schools too often promote dependence and this limits student's choices and decision-making opportunities. This is another area that the Project REACH model has taught

me the value of giving students more responsibility for facilitating the process an important factor in the student's future success.

The development of The Transition Portal would help to clarify and define the transitioning process. Currently transition plans are more in name than in any actively coordinated process. In my experience I have found it important to ensure that all parties have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in facilitating the transitioning process and this creates a more coordinated process. According to the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), parents, students, schools and adult service providers are all responsible parties in the transitioning process. The difficulty arises in deciding who is responsible for specific aspects of the transition process and ensuring that those responsible are following through with their responsibilities. The Transition Portal is an attempt to help clarify and define the roles and responsibilities of the various parties while also creating a mechanism for better coordinating services and a means of holding the responsible parties accountable.

My goal here is to encourage students with disabilities to develop confidence and self-determination skills while also providing support and guidance in the pursuit of these students' goals and dreams. In a time of ever increasing standards and accountability it makes sense to develop a more sophisticated approach to developing and facilitating transition plans that also helps students to develop the critical self-determination skills. Self-determination skills have come to be associated with a better quality of life and the effectiveness of all transition-related practices are related directly to their impact in facilitating self-determination (Morningstar and Kleinhammer-Tramill, 1999). This leads to my proposal for The Transition Portal that will upgrade the traditional transition plan.

The following will guide you through the process by which I came to the realization that there was a need for web-based transitioning and began to develop this idea. I describe my experience working in the Boston Public Schools and review the current use of transition plans there. I go on to share an overview of the prototype and discuss how it will be implemented and evaluated through testing with users, which I hope, will take place sometime next fall. I end with the future direction this project is likely to go in.

PROPOSAL IN PROGRESS

The idea for this project evolved from the combination of skills I developed through CCT courses and practical experience working with students with disabilities in the Boston school system through Project REACH. Since the Boston Public Schools use of technology is limited I decided to look into developing this proposal. The ultimate goal is to create the template for The Transition Portal and then allow it to be utilized freely by schools that choose to do so through a free and open-source agreement. There are no limitations to the development of this project according to the Boston schools Technology plan and the feedback I have received from various Boston Public school employees. The consensus has been that this project would be a great help to staff and a tremendously powerful tool for students.

The need for The Transition Portal is clear. Students with disabilities are being left behind because of various structural obstacles and ineffective transition plans. After carrying out the General Needs Assessment it became clear to me that there is a breakdown in communication between middle school when the transition plans are initially written and high school where these plans are intended to be put into action. The universal access to the web allow these plans to become much more accessible to teachers and guidance counselors at the

high school level as well as the parents of students who could become powerful motivating factors for the students if they have more open access to this information. This project is developmentally appropriate and can easily be integrated with current technologies within a specific classroom and across classrooms in a given school. This will provide a possible solution that is currently inadequately addressed within the district's formal or technology plan and will support the access of students with special needs to the general education curriculum.

Why the Web is right tool for the job?

My interest and passion advocating for students with disabilities began with my work with Project REACH at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Here I've served as an Outreach Counselor, identifying disadvantaged young people with disabilities who have the potential for education at the post-secondary level, encouraging them to continue and graduate from secondary school and enroll in a program of post-secondary study. This work has been very meaningful and invigorated my interest in helping to make schools more accommodating and effective in dealing with all students but especially those with special needs. It would be skills that I developed through the CCT program that provided me with what I believe is the right tool for the job of providing students with as much support, information and opportunities as possible to be successful.

Around the same time I began working with Project REACH I also began taking courses in the CCT program. In two of the first few classes I took (CRCRTH 640 Environment, Science and Society and EDCG 610 Computers, Technology and Education taught by a CCT instructor) I worked on projects developing educational web sites. While the sites were very crude they introduced me to the power of the web as an educational tool. I began thinking about how I

could use this medium to provide more efficient and effective services to the students I was serving in REACH. One of the first uses was in fact a spin off of the site from my EDCG 610 project, which was a web site that allowed students to trace the history and roots of Hip Hop culture. This project was very popular with students and staff. I went on to present this material in various forms at several national conferences on special education and the arts.

While providing specialized educational support services to special needs students through REACH and developing web sites in some of my CCT courses I learned about accessibility issues affecting the way people with disabilities access information on the Internet. Upon learning and thinking about the ways in which learner differences affected outcomes I picked up a book by David H. Rose and Anne Meyer called Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning. The book is based on the research of folks at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), which was founded in 1984 with a mission of developing, and applying technologies that would expand learning opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The material in this book fascinated me and made me realize that creating educational web sites was not quite as simple as producing and developing educational content and then posting it on the web. The idea of Universal Design Learning in which content is developed to fit various learner diversity changed the way I thought about web-based information. My wife, Shino who is a software designer and I began developing websites for various individuals, universities, and non-profit organizations as a small business. And one of the things that we decided was that all of the content that we developed was going to be accessible to all.

These accessible web sites are designed and written in ways that assure that all users can access and benefit from the content. These sites look visually the same when accessible as any web site would look visually. They differ from regular web sites in several qualities.

The common features of accessible web sites include:

- "Alternative tags" for all non-text items

- Appropriate uses of color; color never conveys content

- Tables with content formatted for understandability

These features allow individuals who are blind or with low-vision and those also with hearing impairments to access all the information from these sites in a manner which understandable and efficient. The reality is that these sites allow all users, with or without disabilities to access and benefit from the site. Its about inclusion and not exclusion through ignorance or laziness because these sites are no more difficult to design and code than non-accessible sites. In fact many other web designers that I have spoken with think that accessible sites are easier to create and maintain precisely because they take into account making the content usable; meaning it is easy to access and understand the layout of the site upon visiting the site for only a few seconds.

The universal aspect of accessible web content is only one reason why I believe that the web is the best tool for the job of creating and maintaining transition plans. The Transition Portal will be easier to access making it more likely it will be utilized. The web-based, digital format "can overcome the limitations of the traditional instructional format" associated with traditional transition plans (Rose, 2004). The benefits are many and require little training or complicated technology skills to use. The idea is simple to digitize transition plans so that they can be more versatile allowing for revision, continuous and immediate documentation of steps in the transition process. Digitalization also allows for variety of delivery formats, and hypertext

markup language (HTML) and other code languages for constructing web pages allowing the web page designer to direct the display of different components (italicizing important dates on a transition time-line fore example). The advantage of these marking tools is that they allow teachers and students to easily alter content to accommodate individual needs or preferences providing flexibility.

The Transition Portal is designed to be flexible in that it can be tailored to the needs of the students as well as the needs of the school personnel that will be accessing much of this information. The Transition Portal can be designed with individual students interests and goals in mind. If a student were interested in say, applying only to public universities in Massachusetts then he/she could type in the schools into a table that will provide a checklist for what steps in the application process they need to take or have already taken (Appendix 7). The networking capability will open access to a plethora of transitioning resources available on the Web and can direct students to transitioning resources such the Colleges he/she want to apply, financial aid information, external agencies and other content. Tearing down barriers to information is the most appealing aspect of utilizing the web as the medium developing transition plans.

The plan to bring this technology into the classroom to maximize access and learning opportunities of diverse learners is a simple one. The Transition Portal will be accessible via the Internet at http://www.webforeveryone.org/. All that users will need to access The Portal is a computer with an Internet connection, something that all schools currently have. There are also community centers, libraries and other institutions throughout the city that would provide venues for students and parents to access this information.

The content of The Portal will include the traditional transition plans material, satisfying

legal requirements as well as supplemental information that complement the transition plan. The information currently documented by these plans would remain the same however it would be more easily accessible and a more general record of a students progress could be input by teachers and guidance counselors who interact with the student. Training would also be provided for teachers and guidance counselors to be able to utilize The Transition Portal as well as train students to use it. The access to this information would be available to administrators, guidance counselors, students, teachers and parents to allow for multiple engagement points from these actors with the student. Engagement is the key to The Transition Portal. The information is merely a guide map it is the interactions that are developed between the adults and the student to help facilitate the long and often stressful process of developing an appropriate transition plan and working towards its goals.

The primary goals of The Transition Portal are as follows:

- Increasing access to information about student for facilitation purposes by guidance and teachers.

- Guidance and teachers can then direct learning opportunities for students in transition (Appendix 5).

- Provide a template for educators allowing them to incorporate their own material, presentation formats, i.e., graphics, text, video and other organizational models of transition planning (Appendix 6).

- Provide students with a place to access the information that will be critical to help keep track of steps needed to complete in working toward his/her transitioning goals. This could include a college track, career track or a combination of the two (Appendix 3).

- Provide information for students about external agencies that are available to help the

students work toward their transition goals (Appendix 4).

Strategies for Incorporating Web-based transition planning into School Transition Programs

My underlying belief that Boston Public School transition planning for students with disabilities are ineffective requires that I develop practices for incorporating my alternative into the school transition planning process. The Transition Portal will not require schools to completely discard their current process. I believe that in order for this alternative to be effective that schools utilize it as a means of filling in the gaps in their current transition planning. These gaps will vary from school to school but I anticipate that schools will best utilize The Transition Portal by doing the following:

- Allow students to take on more responsibility for developing their vision statements and to oversee the long-term development of these visions. As the student develops academic skills, confidence and socially he/she will likely change their long-term educational and career objectives. If the student has the ability to document these growth areas allowing for his/her counselors, teachers and parents to observe then it is more likely that the adults will be able to direct counseling and learning opportunities that will allow the student to move in a direction more in line with the students own abilities and goals.

- Travel with the student from the middle school until college. Currently transition plans do travel with the student however they are typically inaccessible to counselors, teachers, parents and students. The web allows near instantaneous access from anywhere in the world provided there is an Internet connection.

- Increased student responsibility for developing a transition plan that more accurately

reflects the student's goals. If the student has access to the transition plan and is able to add his/her input into the process then self-determination skills can be exercised and gained in the process (Appendix 8).

The Advisory Board

I have asked a variety of educational administrators and special education teachers to serve on an Advisory Board to monitor the implementation of this project in the schools (Appendix 9). The Advisory Board also includes several teachers and guidance counselors who have committed to using The Transition Portal in their classrooms' and with their students. The Advisory Board would also make recommendations and monitor future development of The Transition Portal.

Summation

The Transition Portal is designed to help schools better serve the long-term needs of their special education population's. The Portal provides a template for school's to utilize in directing their transition planning learning opportunities. It also focuses transition planning back onto the student providing the student with information and a sense of control over a stressful and sometimes confusing process. The only obstacles to the implementation of the Portal are the willingness of schools to use it. It will not cost them money nor will they need to purchase expensive equipment or software to access it.

<u>Steps Ahead</u>

I have identified three steps to further the development of this project. These steps include live testing, developing an implementation plan and choosing an implementation site. While the template for The Transition Portal is not entirely complete, there is enough material to subject it to live testing. The testing phase will help isolate problems, improve upon The Transition Portals interface and make other adjustments. This phase will also help to develop training material to help train users prior to full implementation of the Portal. Last and probably most important is to choose the first implementation site. Choosing the first site to implement The Transition Portal will provide the space and time to monitor the implementation process for future implementation elsewhere. These steps will help to further the future development of this project.

The live testing stage is important in working out problems with The Transition Portal and the development of training procedures and an overall implementation plan. I don't anticipate difficulty finding a cohort of students, teachers and guidance counselors to participate in the live testing stage. Several members of the Advisory Board have repeatedly expressed interest in providing cohorts of students from their schools to participate in the initial testing phase and thanks to nearly a decade of capital investments on computers and networks in the Boston public schools, very little if any hardware is needed in these schools to allow for initial testing. The primary need will be to train teachers and guidance counselors who in turn will be training their students how to utilize The Transition Portal during testing. This training information will be helpful in developing an overall implementation plan to guide the implementation process in other schools throughout the district.

The implementation plan will be developed based on the information gained from the live testing stage. The implementation plan may vary from site to site but should remain constant in regards to providing information about what must happen during implementation and a reasonable schedule for doing so. This plan will also help provide information on initial training prior to the system being implemented. The goal is to be able to illustrate how this technology will be able to improve upon existing goals. The implementation plan is another step in putting the solution (The Transition Portal) in place to help schools monitor and facilitate the transitioning process for its special needs students.

The process of choosing the initial implementation site will be based in large part upon the information gained from the live testing stage and the development of the implementation plan. The most obvious candidate for initial implementation would be the site that conducted the live testing stage. Though it might be beneficial to utilize the ongoing information from the live testing stage site to help future implementation sites. The answer will come from results of the initial testing site and recommendations from the Advisory Board. Either way there is a clear process for continuing the development of The Transition Portal. These steps are not the end of the development of The Transition Portal so much as they are steps to improving upon the template and its usability.

Appendix 1

███

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

STUDENT: ███   ███   ███   DOB: 05/19/1987   GRADE/LEVEL: 12
MEETING DATE: 05/20/2004   MEETING NO: ███   SASID#: ███
        PLAN COVERS: 05/2004 TO 05/2005   MAJOR SERVICE: XX(L1)

SCHOOL DISTRICT:
    NAME: 1250   WEST ROXBURY HIGH   CONTACT: ███   ███
    ADDRESS: 1205   V F W PKWY   PHONE: ███
    CITY: WEST ROXBURY   MA. 02132

PARENT AND/OR STUDENT CONCERNS

WHAT CONCERN(S) DOES THE PARENT AND/OR STUDENT WANT TO SEE ADDRESSED TO ENHANCE
THE STUDENT'S EDUCATION?

███ IS CONCERNED ABOUT GRADUATING ON TIME.

STUDENT STRENGTHS AND KEY EVALUATION RESULTS SUMMARY

WHAT ARE THIS STUDENT'S EDUCATIONAL STRENGTHS, INTEREST AREAS, SIGNIFICANT
PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES AND PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS? WHAT IS THE STUDENT'S TYPE
OF DISABILITY(IES), GENERAL EDUCATION PERFORMANCE INCLUDING MCAS/DISTRICT TEST
RESULTS, ACHIEVEMENT TOWARDS GOALS AND LACK OF EXPECTED PROGRESS, IF ANY?

███ IS A GRADE 11 STUDENT AT THE WEST ROXBURY HIGH SCHOOL WHO CAME FROM
THE CLEVELAND MIDDLE SCHOO. ███ IS INTERESTED IN VIDEO GAMES AND WRESTLING
███ AN ALERT STUDENT WHO HAS PASSED THE MCAS. ███ STILL NEEDS SOME
HELP IN MATH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT. ███ WILL TAKE ALL REQUIRED STANDARDIZED
AND INFORMAL TESTS WITH ACCOMMODATIONS WHEN

ALLOWED BY TEST RULES.███ HAS NO PHYSICAL CONSTRAINTS TO EDUCATION AND
TAKES NO MEDICATION. HE LEARNS BEST MULTISENSORALLY WITH POSITIVE
REINFORCEMENT, DETAILED TASK ANALYSIS, CONSTANT REINFORCEMENT, REPETITION,,
FREQUENT ORAL DIRECTIONS, DEMONSTRATIONS, IN A REGULAR CLASS SETTING. ███
WILL BE EVALUATED WITH STANDARDIZED TESTS AND TEACHER MADE TESTS AND QUIZZES
AND WILL RECEIVE PROGRESS REPORTS, REPORT CARDS AND OTHER TEACHER REPORTS. HE
WILL DEMONSTRATE WHAT HAS BEEN

LEARNED BY WRITTEN AND ORAL PRESENTATIONS AND PROJECTS. THIS STUDENT IS
EXPECTED TO PROGRESS TOWARD ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GOALS OF THIS IEP USING THE
ACCOMMODATIONS OF THIS IEP. * PLEASE SEE ATTACHED SPECIALIST AND TEACHER
REPORTS ********PLEASE NOTE------SERVICES TO BE PROVIDED ONLY IF STUDENT
ATTENDS WEST ROXBURY HIGH SCHOOL**********

VISION STATEMENT: WHAT IS THE VISION FOR THIS STUDENT?

CONSIDER THE NEXT 1 TO 5 YEAR PERIOD WHEN DEVELOPING THIS STATEMENT. BEGINING
NO LATER THAN AGE 14, THE STATEMENT SHOULD BE BASED ON THE STUDENTS PREFERENCES
AND INTERESTS, AND SHOULD INCLUDE DESIRED OUTCOMES IN ADULT LIVING, POST-
SECONDARY AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS.

███ WILL GRADUATE AND BECOME A POLICE OFFICER

```
S247              SPECIAL EDUCATION INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
MTG NO:          STA:      TRANSITIONAL SERVICES        (ENTRY)
STUDENT ID:                            SCHL: 2090      DOB:
"VISION" STATEMENT DONE - DO YOU WANT TO ENTER IN REST OF DATA      Y    (Y/N)
VISION STATEMENT:

 ¬DED TRANSITIONAL SERVICES:   ANSWER Y/N FOR EACH, AND DESCRIBE FOR EITHER
  .NSTRUCTION:    (Y/N)        RESPSBLE PARTY:
    YES/NO, DESCRIBE:

  COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES:     (Y/N)
    YES/NO, DESCRIBE:

  EMPLOYMENT OBJECTIVES:     (Y/N)
    YES/NO, DESCRIBE:

  DAILY LIVING SKILLS:       (Y/N)
    YES/NO, DESCRIBE:

  VOCATIONAL EVALUATION:     (Y/N)
    YES/NO, DESCRIBE:

CHAPTER 688 REFERRAL:      (Y/N)  IF YES, REFERRAL MADE ON:
247.01  PLEASE ENTER ALL DATA                SCREEN VERIFIED: N    (Y/N)
```
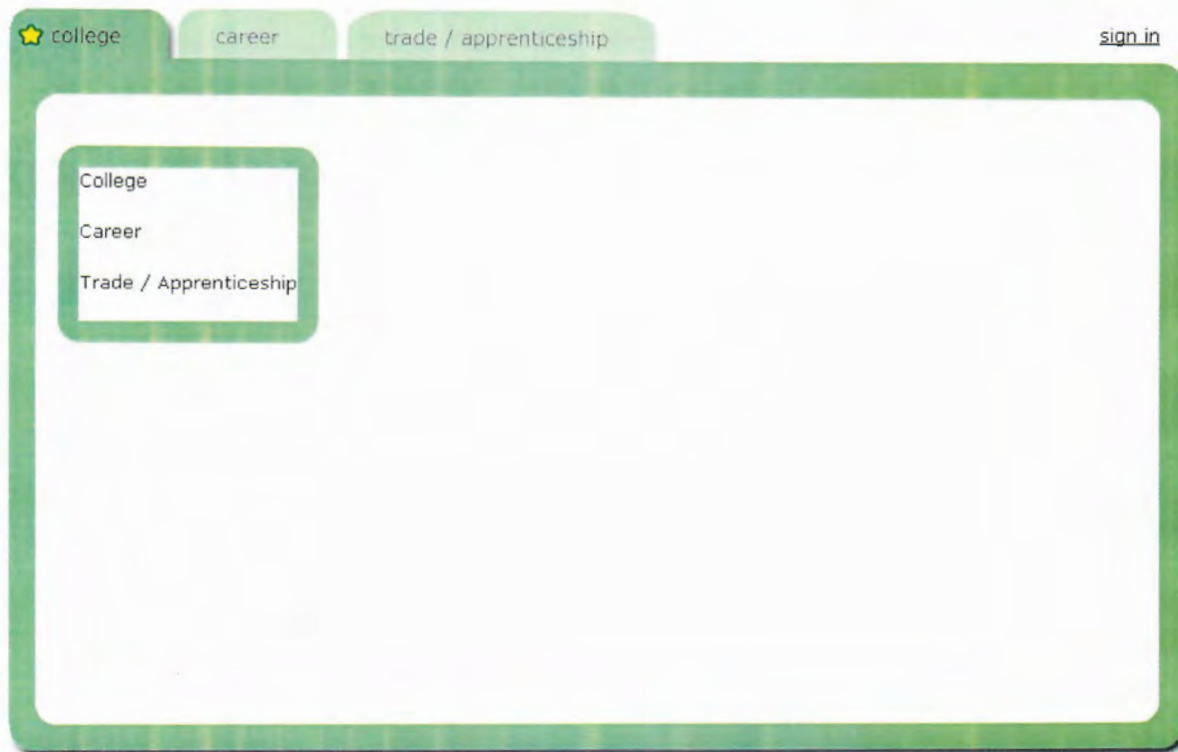
Appendix 3

Appendix 4

college   career   trade / apprenticeship   sign in

College

Career

Trade / Apprenticeship

Appendix 5

college   career   trade / apprenticeship   Hello, shino@pinksoft.net logout

calendar   test scores   charts my personal info

College

Career

Trade / Apprenticeship

calendar | testtest scores | application process | my personal info

Appendix 6

calendar   test scores   charts   my personal info

August
September
October
November
December
January
February
March
April
May
June
July

✓ Take the PSAT/NMSQT.

The PSAT/NMSQT do es <u>not</u> require that you remember facts from your classes. It measures the fundamental skills you have gained though all of your school years <96> reading, writing, reasoning and math.

Ke ep in mind that the PSAT/NMSQT will help you prepare for SAT tests.

✓ Get organized for the test.

Gather everything you<92>ll need the night before the test. This includes your admission tick et, a photo ID, #2 pencils and a calculator. (Certain kinds of calculators are prohibited.)

- Eat a good breakfast. You should not bring food into the test with you.
- Arrive at th e testing site a little early.

✓ Get involved in extracurricular activities.

Colleges <96> and scholarship programs <96> like students who are well rounded. Grades and standardi zed test scores are important, but there is more you can do to make yourself an attractive college or scholarship candidate. Activities such as clubs, sports student government, newspaper, drama and music look good on applications!

For wiring assignments, be organized. Outline ideas first. This will help when you write college application essay s, too.

Appendix 7

Preliminary Possibilities [edit]
Check off the appropriate boxes as you research the colleges that interest you.

Name of school	Requested info	Received info	Read info	Looked at web site	Will visit
University of Massachusetts Boston	✓			✓	✓
North Eastern University	✓				✓
University of Massachusetts Amherst	✓	✓	✓		
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth	✓	✓	✓	✓	

calendar | testtest scores | application process | my personal info

Appendix 8

calendar   test scores   charts   my personal info

Organize your early plans for college.

Work on the Personal Preference Scale in the first part of the year. Then, start adding names to your Preliminary Possibilities chart. As the year goes on, talk to your school counselor and your parents about the colleges on your list.

Personal Preference Scale [edit]

What kind of college might you be interested in? Rate your interest for each item.

	No	May be	Yes
○ a large college (such as state university)			✓
○ a small college		✓	
○ a college known for its strength in a particular academic area (if you answer "maybe" or "yes, " write the academic area[s] that interest you in the space provided below)	✓		
○ an urban college (city)		✓	
○ a rural college (country or suburb)			✓
○ a college close to home	✓		
⦿ a single-gender college		✓	
○ a college with a religious affiliation	✓		
○ a two-year college			✓
○ a military education (having college paid for in exchange for serving in the armed services)			✓

Your other preferences here:
Testing my preferences comments.

My other preferences are:
1. my one preference
2. my two preference
3. my three preference

Appendix 9

The members of the Advisory Board:

Mr. Ron Inniss, Guidance Counselor, Burke High School

Shino Ito, Executive Director for Pinksoft.net & Senior Web Developer and Programmer Simmons College.

Mr. Tom Legendre, Special Education Teacher, Dorchester Education Complex

Mr. Craig Melzer, Inclusion Teacher, McCormack Middle School

Mrs. Lynn Mendez, Evaluation Team Facilitator, Gavin Middle School

Dr. Deborah Merriam, Special Education Guidance Counselor West Roxbury Education Complex

Bill Pollard, Director of Project REACH, University of Massachusetts Boston

Mrs. Grace Quigua, Special Education Teacher, Madison Park High School

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