Restructuring and Improving Transition Services through School-University Collaboration

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Abstract

The need for educational program restructuring in secondary schools has been established through numerous reports of poor outcomes for school leavers with special needs. In Hawaii, a collaborative educational program restructuring effort for youth with special needs was initiated in the Summer of 1991. This article describes the conceptual planning and operational steps of this restructuring effort. The key players in this effort included (a) Hawaii University Affiliated Program (Hawaii UAP); (b) Hawaii State Department of Education, Special Needs Branch (DOE-SNB) and (c) six Oahu secondary school teams. Four components were conceptualized as critical to the success of this restructuring process: commitment, direction, knowledge and facilitation. The operational phases in which these four components were developed and attained is described in both chronological and developmental sequence.

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In his April 1991 address entitled "America 2000," President George Bush challenged educators to become architects in the restructuring of a new American school. Included in this address were solicitations "...to break the mold"; "...to build for the next century. [We must] reinvent - literally start from scratch and reinvent the American school. No questions should be off limits, no answers automatically assumed. We're not after one single solution for every school. We're interested in finding every way to make school better" (America 2000 Sourcebook, 1991, p. 7.)

However as Kaufman (1991) points out, "ringing rhetoric" has a bad habit of rarely being linked to reality and results. If real results are going to occur, schools require support in the restructuring process at the local level. A greater awareness and understanding of program restructuring is needed.

The America 2000 Sourcebook (1991) describes restructuring as a dynamic process that (a) requires a system of accountability that focuses on results and outcomes; (b) encourages decentralization of authority by moving the decision-making process to the school site, thus giving self-determination responsibilities to each school; (c) provides a program of instruction that is externally validated against the knowledge and skills that will be required of future citizens in the world; (d) creates an educational system that employs and supports highly competent teachers based on the outcomes achieved by students and (e) encourages active and sustained community, business and parental involvement.

During the summer of 1991, district-level administrators from the Hawaii State Department of Education, Office of Instructional Services, Special Needs Branch (DOE-SNB); faculty members from the University of Hawaii, Hawaii University Affiliated Program (Hawaii UAP); and six Oahu secondary schools (Kahuku, Nanakuli, Pearl City, Roosevelt, Waianae, Waialua) accepted the President's challenge to begin a restructuring process that would result in the five outcomes cited in the America 2000 Sourcebook (1991). In June 1991, 67 participants attended a two-day symposium intended to encourage each high school to enter into a long-term commitment leading to restructured transitional options for their students with special needs. This paper addresses (a) the conceptual framework and (b) the series of operational steps used to support secondary school teams in the State of Hawaii to restructure and improve educational programs for students with special needs.

A Conceptual Framework

Vrakking (1990) wrote that successful restructuring hinges on the attainment of four independent but highly interrelated components: commitment, direction, knowledge and facilitation. An adaptation of the conceptual model of Vrakking (1990) (see Figure 1) served to guide the planning of the program restructuring process. The planning teams worked with each of the four components, transforming them into a dynamic operational process for restructuring their programs.
Component I: Commitment

The most efficient means of generating and infusing new ideas or change into a program is by securing the commitment of persons charged with the responsibility for creating a vision or mission. Commitment is secured through planning, evaluating and redirecting efforts toward the realization of a vision or mission (Kaufman & Herman, 1991). Personal commitment to an innovation or change process increases when individuals are given the opportunity to determine their own direction, or to link their own creativity to personal entrepreneurship (Vrakking, 1990). Entrepreneurship within the framework of program restructuring is defined as a willingness to invest spirit and effort to such a degree that one feels and takes personal pride when the innovation or process is successful and feels or suffers personal loss when the innovation or process fails or is not completed.

Component II: Direction

Organizational guidance and assistance in the development of a direction or mission should further individual and group commitment toward educational program restructuring. The evolutionary development of a mission or directional statement assists school restructuring teams to explore and define outcomes they expect of the educational system and processes to be applied to produce desired outcomes. McCune (1986) refers to the process of developing a mission or directional statement as a "tight-loose" organizational strategy. The formulation of a mission statement assists team members to define tightly desired educational outcomes to be attained and at the same time, provides the flexibility necessary for each team to discover and develop the means for attaining its respective outcomes.

Component III: Knowledge

The cornerstone for professional endeavor is often the technical and educational knowledge that can be brought to bear on problem situations (Arends, 1990). One of the primary roles of university teacher training programs is to produce technical and educational knowledge leading to the development of theories demonstrating more effective ways (best practices) to make changes in the lives of teachers and the students they serve (Gooliad, 1990). Paradoxically, Arends (1990) notes that the production of technical and education best practice and knowledge at the university level is often deemed irrelevant by the very practitioners who are expected to use it. Thus, it is important that knowledge or best practice information be generated and shared within the context of an overall restructuring framework. The framework should assist decisions concerning the type of information to be used, how the information will be accessed and used, as well as the types of impacts that will result from the knowledge base.

Component IV: Facilitation

For educational program restructuring activities to be constructively initiated and maintained, it is important that several operational conditions be facilitated and supported. Operational conditions usually include the establishment of (a) roles and responsibilities, (b) procedures or guidelines for individual and team operation, (c) time lines, (d) budget and resource allocations and (e) evaluation and feedback mechanisms. A requirement of the facilitation component is that it consist of proposed changes that team members believe have a reasonable chance of being attained. Within this component, the ideal visions generated in Component II confront the reality of personnel, structures, resources, and systems that will physically produce that ideal vision (Cope, 1987).

An Operational Process

The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 was operationalized in a three step process (Stodden, 1991)
Phase I: Interdisciplinary Team Building

The six secondary schools participating in the education restructuring process initiated team development activities under the direction of the DOE-SNB and the Hawaii UAP, with the guidance of school-level transition teachers. School-level personnel were given directives that teams must include critical players (stakeholders) within the school and community, such as teachers (special and general education), administrators, counselors, families, consumers and community members. Each school transition teacher assembled the appropriate team membership and submitted the list to the DOE-SNB/Hawaii UAP coordinators. As this process evolved, the "entrepreneur" theme became a reality with team members committing their time and expertise to the process. The Hawaii UAP committed stipend money and provided university credit to participants. The DOE-SNB committed assistance and incentive funds in the form of mini-grants enabling teams to function during the school year.

Phase II, Step A: Mission Statement

Using guidelines from the Secondary Special Program Improvement Guide (Stodden, 1991), organizational guidance was developed by drafting mission statements. The context for generating mission statements came from two reports presented at the symposium: (a) Wagner's (1991) follow-up data on approximately 8,000 former students with special needs across the United States, indicating continued poor to mediocre post-school outcomes in the areas of employment, housing, community and leisure/recreation participation and (b) James' (1991) longitudinal data on the post-secondary school outcomes of 63 former students with special needs in the State of Hawaii, indicating similar results. By generalizing the impact of national and state data to their own secondary programs, each school team was able to create the first working drafts of their mission statements. During July and August, the teams met one or more times to refine the mission statements to reflect the concerns and desires of their specific special education programs. As a result, all six secondary schools created and used highly personal and specific mission statements of planned outcomes before school resumed in September.

Phase II, Step B: Reviewing Best Practice

Following the development and refinement of their mission statements, each of the six secondary school teams spent time reviewing a list of best practice initiatives. Each best practice area was prioritized as it contributed toward the realization of their mission statements. In conjunction with Hawaii UAP faculty and DOE-SNB administrative staff, each team explored and discussed ways to incorporate those best practice initiatives into their respective schools.

Phase II, Steps C, D, E

With the completion of Steps A and B, the six restructuring teams had determined outcomes and processes expected of students (mission statement) and had selected best practice concepts that would facilitate attainment of the desired outcomes. The next step in the sequence of restructuring activities was to review current educational programming within three elements of activity that impact student learning and eventual success as adults (Figure 2, Step C). The three program elements reviewed were (a) assessment procedures and activities, (b) planning procedures and materials and (c) instructional settings and procedures. Information concerning the status and effectiveness of each program was reviewed for each of the program elements and group discussion moved toward those best practice concepts that would address areas of concern or need.
Team members then proceeded to work on integrating selected best practice concepts within each of the three program elements (Figure 2, Step D). Discussion by team members focused on how each of the program elements (assessment, planning, instruction) would be changed given the impact of selected best practice applications. The completion of Phase II activities resulted in consensus descriptions of program element revisions that were consistent with the team mission.

Phase III: Action Planning

Beginning in June and continuing through Fall 1991, the DOE-SNB, Hawaii UAP, and team leaders within each secondary school team, jointly developed and presented activities and examples that assisted team members in (a) prioritizing team objectives; (b) developing realistic time lines for achieving those objectives; (c) designating persons/agencies for carrying out those objectives and (d) exploring ways to develop formative and summative evaluation procedures to determine whether or not these objectives have been or are in the process of being met. To further enhance outcomes, the Hawaii UAP conducted six courses focused specifically on restructuring secondary school program elements. These content-focused courses will continue to be offered to each team on a request basis. In addition, the DOE-SNB continues to offer strong support for the development of each team through the award of district monies for consultants, materials and in-service training.

Summary

Restructuring the transition service options for students with special needs demands stakeholders in the transition process to reconceptualize the role of the school and the relationship between the school, the community, and the larger society (Gutherie & Gutherie, 1991). This paper describes a conceptualized and operationalized dynamic process to create a cadre of education stakeholders dedicated to such a reconceptualization. To that end, four interrelated outcomes were cited as critical to the success of any restructuring process: team commitment, team direction, knowledge and facilitation. The conceptualized components were operationalized within three phases of school-based team activity. We have developed within each school a feeling of program “ownership” through the creation of a team of stakeholders committed to achieving improved adult outcomes for their students. We have encouraged these stakeholders to create a personal mission statement that will determine the directions stakeholders take to achieve desired outcomes. We have facilitated the development of efficient collaborative links between agencies, schools, universities, and communities to determine best practice for achieving desired outcomes. And we have provided these stakeholders with the resources, both human and financial, to carry out desired outcomes now and in the future. Meaningful change in the adult lives of our students with special needs awaits evaluation.

References


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