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UNM PROFESSOR AWARDED DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION GRANT TO COORDINATE SCHOOL-TO-WORK INITIATIVES

Ultimately designed to help teens with exceptionalities pursue meaningful employment or continue their educations, the initiatives also boost secondary retention and postsecondary recruitment and help the state meet Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requirements. "The outcomes for students at risk of failing in school and life, especially those with disabilities, can be grim when they aren't provided careful relevant preparation," Blalock says.

She says data show that people with disabilities are disproportionately:

- unemployed (65-75% unemployed or underemployed)
- dependent on family or other caregivers for living arrangements
- not participating in postsecondary education or training
- not participating in regular recreation/leisure experiences
- incarcerated

While working with juvenile corrections special educators, Blalock learned that the percentage of incarcerated youth who have disabilities average more than 60 percent. "Most of these youth are diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disorders and many with learning disabilities as well," she says. "These are the youth who we know from research are more likely to be caught and imprisoned and who are extremely susceptible to gang recruitment and substance abuse. They are least likely to figure out how to survive for very long both in jail and on the streets, and so they are at high risk for early death."

Youth who take part in a school-to-career transition program have better outcomes, she notes. "We also know from studies in New Mexico and around the country that the single most important predictor of employment success after high school is having had a paid job while in high school," Blalock says "This shows the importance of building students' career competence and work-based learning experiences while they are in K-12 settings."

The grant-supported initiatives will look at the big picture - where these kids are headed as they reach adulthood, Blalock says. "Teachers, administrators and counselors need to put teaching and learning in context so when kids ask, 'why do I have to learn this?' they have a meaningful response for the students."

Collaborating with Blalock and UNM are Sue Gronewold, transition director, NMSDE Special Education Unit; the state division of Vocational Rehabilitation; James Alarid, special education professor, New Mexico Highlands University; Marilyn D'Ottavio, transition services director, Albuquerque Public Schools; other school districts, the Center for Entrepreneurship, Parents Reaching Out, the Arc of New Mexico,

State School to Work Office, Santa Fe's Executive Leadership Council, Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center and the former National Transition Alliance.

Numerous other stakeholders contribute time and effort, including students, advocacy organizations and community leaders. Two-year colleges also play a big role by specializing in diverse learners and career preparation.

Among the initiatives is the Statewide Transition Coordinating Council. Formed after passage of the 1994-1996 House Bill 981 "Task Force on Transition of Youth with Disabilities to Postsecondary Education," the council consists of approximately 40 members who meet bi-monthly to work on support systems for youth exiting high school.

Subgroups serving as advisors to state and local agencies are working on five major tasks this year:

- Statewide database of youth and young adults in transition
- State transition plan with single point of contact
- Local interagency agreements and transition teams
- Marketing, outreach education and technical assistance
- Professional development of key stakeholders.

As well, in its second year of operation, the Transition Specialist Cadre, made up of approximately 50 "transition specialists" identified by school districts, leads in developing or improving local transition services. Focused on student development, specialists will participate in five training and technical assistance meetings in 2001-02.

Another initiative, the "Transition Outcomes Project" assessed four pilot school districts - Alamogordo, Bernalillo, Roswell, and Taos - on their compliance with federal transition planning requirements for 14-22 year olds in 2001. Some 30 districts and the Bureau of Indian Affairs are now participating.

In "Pathways to Diploma Training" trainers help educators and families focus on graduation options available to students served in special education, changes in regulations that affect the role of school boards, and more.

The grant will also support the annual Summer Transition Institute. At the 2002 event, set for June 17-19 in

Ruidoso, facilitators and local and national experts will help participants make progress in the areas of interagency linkages and community transition teams in line with districts' local action plans.

Blalock and colleague Deborah Riftenbery are also proposing a new Academy in Career Awareness, Exploration, and Education, in collaboration with the Middle Rio Grande Business-Education Collaborative (MRGBEC), a non-profit regional school-to-careers partnership that also oversees the Central N.M. Workforce Investment Act Youth Council. Other key partners will include NMSDE and area school districts. This year's collaboration with MRGBEC focused on an "Educator in the Workplace" program, which helped apprentice teachers and counselors learn about career development and its place in student development. Sandia Laboratories, Intel, PNM and many small businesses offer site tours, job shadowing and paid externships in support of the program.

"These initiatives help educators learn how to teach kids to identify and reach goals and to not only become workers or career oriented adults, but also good consumers, family members and citizens," Blalock says. "For kids who have disabilities, incidental learning doesn't work. It has to be experiential. We have to help them make those connections to the adult world."

In addition to leading the numerous initiatives, spring semester Blalock will teach a doctoral seminar titled "Trends and Issues in Special Education" at UNM and serve as faculty advisor to an elementary education post BA student teaching cohort. For program information, contact Ginger Blalock, 277-5119, blalock@unm.edu.

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