

## THE REGIONAL VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT CENTER: MEETING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT VOCATIONAL NEEDS

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**ABSTRACT:** While Individual Education plans contain a vocational component for older handicapped students, this component, unlike academic components, is often designed with little, if any, assessment information. Because of the high cost of providing comprehensive vocational assessment services within a school district and because of the paucity of trained vocational educators in the Pacific Northwest, few districts conduct meaningful vocational assessments with their students. In some districts, personnel are forced to assume evaluation duties for which they were not adequately trained. This situation often leads to inefficient evaluation programs and frustrated professionals.

Washington State recognized the need for comprehensive vocational evaluation services and so the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) funded RVAC -- the Regional Vocational Assessment Center. OSPI funding and University of Washington expertise have produced a model evaluation program that is meeting school district needs. Now Washington schools have the precise information their staff need to develop meaningful vocational programs for handicapped young adults.

RVAC has assessed students from approximately 40 school districts in 18 months. RVAC has also evaluated individuals for foster care agencies, the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Washington and the State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. Evaluatees include

teenagers and adults with a variety of disabling conditions including developmental disabilities, neurological impairments, physical impairments, and persons with industrial orthopedic injuries. RVAC also assesses a large population of adjudicated youth as part of a transition project that prepares incarcerated teenagers for re-entry into the public school system.

### The Problem

Public Law 94-142 encourages schools to provide all disabled students with vocational education. Leadership and the movement to provide such education became aware of the need to support a student's vocational placement with accurate information regarding his/her aptitudes and potentials. The notion was that the absence of such information might lead to inappropriate placements of students who would then be exposed to failure at their first vocational endeavor.

The need for vocational assessment in the schools has been amply documented. In a survey of Texas educators, Peterson (1981) found that over 80% felt that comprehensive vocational assessment was critical to develop appropriate educational programs for secondary age handicapped students. The National Association of Vocational Education Special Needs Personnel Committee on Vocational Assessment (McCray, 1981) indicated "all vocational training plans for special needs students should be based on vocational assessment information" (p.20).

Establishing vocational assessment programs within school systems was a unique challenge for educators because vocational assessment, as we know it today, was primarily the invention of vocational rehabilitationists. If we assume that vocational assessment is a scientific process requiring not only skills in measurement, but also trained counseling skills and a sensitivity to observed behaviors, then we must acknowledge the need for professionals trained in all

aspects of this process to develop and coordinate accountable and effective programs. Schools attempting to replicate this process found it necessary to rely on the expertise of professionals within the field of rehabilitation. However, without policies for certifying these professionals, schools were able to pass the responsibility for development of assessment programs to various school personnel, such as special education teachers, vocational education teachers, school psychologists, etc. While these professionals were skilled in their areas of expertise, they did not have the knowledge needed to conduct vocational assessments or to develop comprehensive vocational assessment programs. Therefore schools relied on manufacturers of assessment instrumentation for training.

When discussing the use of commercial work sample systems, Brolin (1982) stated "the critical shortage of trained evaluators created by the increase in demand has forced administrators to seek a 'system' instead of a qualified evaluator" (p.133). He further asserted, "because of the shortage of qualified vocational evaluators, many evaluation programs just do not have the expertise to tailor and make their own work sample systems" (p. 136). While manufacturers' training teaches the fundamentals of the process, school professionals did not have the benefit of long-term training or working with a mentor through internships. Consequently, many school professionals were presented with a task which was often times beyond their level of expertise -- to design a vocational assessment program which could effectively measure the vocational abilities of large numbers of students with varied disabilities and communicate the results to parents, students, and teachers.

This is essentially what occurred in Washington State. Because of a lack of trained vocational evaluators, teachers found themselves in new positions, creating vocational assessment programs with little technical assistance. Several problems resulted. Although

students are being assessed, the information was not being used by classroom teachers to develop vocational programs, largely because they were not able to interpret the results. Also, in many cases the recommendations offered did not relate the programs available through the school district. All community resources and post-secondary training options available to the student were not reflected in the transition process for graduating students. Many evaluators found special education teachers resistant to recommendations and vocational education instructors opposed to inclusion of disabled pupils in their classes. Consequently, vocational evaluation reports were filed after failing to offer vocational direction. Many school districts found evaluation equipment collecting dust while school professionals and parents remained disillusioned regarding the subject of vocational assessment. While larger districts have been able to design and maintain effective programs by employing persons trained in vocational evaluation at leading institutions, smaller districts are unable to provide this much needed service to their special needs students. Hence, many students are at risk for being placed inappropriately and for leaving high school with few vocational skills and little knowledge of resources available for post-secondary training.

### The Solution

In answer to this dilemma, the Regional Vocational Assessment Center (RVAC) was established in 1982 at the University of Washington to meet the needs of the many school districts that are unable to provide assessment services to disabled students. The concept of a regional evaluation center was realized by the University of Washington and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction as a means of offering low cost, efficient services for many school districts. Being located at the

University of Washington allows the Center to draw upon many resources, including specialized training centers for handicapped adults and on-campus work stations. RVAC was designed to serve persons with a large variety of disabilities, including students with learning disabilities, behavior disabilities, those that are developmentally delayed, orthopedically impaired, neurologically impaired, juvenile offenders, youths in foster care, industrially injured adults, and handicapped adults referred by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

In designing the program, great emphasis was placed on the service delivery model to ensure accountability and integration with large numbers of school districts. Therefore, the model was designed to maintain flexibility so that the program could be modified to meet the needs of such diverse populations as incarcerated youth, the developmentally disabled, and students from rural environments.

### **Pre-Assessment Meeting**

Prior to assessing students, and in order to ensure accountability, each school district that refers students to the RVAC for an assessment is visited so that program availability and entry requirements for existing programs can be determined. While this is a simple procedure in some districts many districts have no specific vocational programming available for disabled students. In such situations, the evaluator works with the referral source to locate possible training options on campus and in the community. In many cases, the evaluations are used as a needs assessment by districts so that programs can be designed to meet the specific training needs of the student population. The pre-assessment visit is one of the most significant aspects of the model because it increases the probability that recommendations reflect program availability. A vocational plan of action can be grossly ineffective in spite of a seemingly brilliant

design if it requires resources beyond the capability of the district.

### **Referral**

The referral process at the RVAC was designed to be simple but complete. A referral form requests for each student a description of the vocational development problem, specific questions which need to be answered by the assessment, and basic data necessary to understand the needs of the student. Such data include the results of psychometric tests and information regarding the disabling condition, physical limitation, expressed and/or tested interests, work experience, leisure time activities and social/environmental background. Recent psychological, medical, or neuro-psychological reports are requested. Referral sources also submit the student's most recent individual education plan. Some special education teachers are unfamiliar with vocational assessment, and in such cases, the referral form is completed with the evaluator so that the teacher can learn what to expect from an evaluation. This has proved to be an effective educational process for teachers and guarantees that the evaluation will meet their expectations. It also encourages teachers to refer students for specific reasons, rather than for general assessment, which usually eludes follow-through.

### **Evaluation**

At RVAC, a 4:1 client-to-evaluator ratio is maintained, and a 4-day evaluation period is the accepted norm. However, scheduling is flexible, given the variable work speeds of the client population. The 5th day is used for report writing.

Upon arrival at the center, all students are given an orientation as well as a brief tour of the facility. An initial interview is conducted with each student. This interview is a crucial part of the evaluation

since it is used to establish rapport with the students and to validate data included in the referral form. During this first meeting, the evaluator, along with the student, completes an Individual Evaluation Plan (IEP) which outlines what will take place during the assessment, and lists work samples and tests that will be administered to answer the referral questions. This process has been found to be extremely effective as it involves a student in the decisionmaking process. In fact, students are encouraged to work independently and to make decisions throughout the evaluation. In many cases, we find that students are surprised and a bit uneasy when having to make decisions regarding their own education. Some students find the independent responsibility assumed at the assessment quite unusual, given the rote schedules they maintain at school.

RVAC utilizes paper and pencil psychometrics and commercial evaluation systems such as JEVS and Valpar as well as self-developed work samples to assess students. While the model does not discourage a generalized approach to vocational assessment, it does not sanction administration of all work samples to an individual. Utilizing a prescriptive format, students are only administered those work samples that will answer the questions included on the referral form or those that will increase the student's exposure to occupational domains where he or she has suggested an interest.

Post sample interviewing encourages students to express feelings about a certain activity and to make a decision about whether or not they would want to perform this type of work in a job. Again, students are encouraged to make decisions throughout the assessment, since this is an essential element in vocational development that usually goes unstressed in the school environment.

Many students lack exposure to the world of work and find it difficult to engage in discourse regarding the topic. Their perceptions have been

influenced by their lifestyles, which may include unrealistic ideas about common occupations. (We have seen students who associate Magnum P.I. with private investigation and are therefore interested in this as an occupational goal.) In order to increase the students' awareness of the work world, group and individual values clarification exercises are used to promote open discussion about issues such as job satisfaction, salary and benefits, work environment, etc. Students are also taught to conduct occupational research by using a structured interview to find out about jobs held by friends or relatives. Through this method students are taught to converse with others in a professional manner and to inquire about necessary information such as specific job tasks, specialized equipment, training and qualifications, remuneration, and job availability. Students are encouraged to use these techniques when searching for employment or making a decision about a specific occupation.

To meet the needs of specific populations, the evaluation process and the instrumentation is continually modified. For instance, developmentally delayed individuals are frequently readministered specific work samples to assess learning ability through practice and the use of specific training strategies. While destandardizing tests administrations invalidates normative data, this strategic method of assessment is particularly important for this population given their failure on traditional assessment batteries. All modifications are described in the vocational evaluation report. RVAC has also developed work samples which measure the entry level abilities needed to be eligible for post-secondary training programs for developmentally disabled adults. This results in replication of the training methods used in these programs to predict client success.

An interim interview midway through the evaluation is used to

modify the IEP if necessary. During the exit interview, the evaluator shares results with the school district, community or adult agencies. The student and the evaluator together design vocational options for the student which will be described in the evaluation report and shared at a staffing following the assessment.

### **The Vocational Plan**

Collecting information regarding a student's vocational potential is only part of the evaluation. Far more crucial is the way the information is interpreted and presented. This is why an evaluator's counseling and resource skills are so important. If a person's vocational skill level were the only predictor of vocational success, the chore would be simple. However, a variety of factors determine success, including motivation, job seeking skills, independent problem solving, job availability, etc.

All of these factors are considered during the highly individualized process of plan development. Occupational research and investigation of community programs or agencies is often performed by the evaluator to determine the likelihood of an individual's success, or to locate specific services needed to enhance a student's vocational skills. This way, the evaluator can be certain that recommendations are based on available resources. Also, rather than reporting only evaluation results and general recommendations, the evaluator offers the student and teachers a prescriptive plan for vocational development. For instance, recommendations for developmentally disabled students not only include occupational areas for training, but also specific training strategies which may produce competitive employment skills with individual students in either skill acquisition or work adjustment.

The evaluator must be responsible for creating a vocational plan of action which can be implemented.

A vocational evaluation specialist must understand the relationship between evaluation results and implementation of habilitation plan. Therefore, the evaluator must use counseling, testing, and behavior observations to assess students and to identify a vocational path. For instance, a student may possess skills at a competitive level, but a lethargic approach to the evaluation and school work in general may indicate potential failure in a job. This, along with recommendations for remediation are communicated to the student and the referral source.

### **The Staffing**

Each student evaluated at RVAC attends a staffing along with parents and/or guardians, the evaluator, and significant school personnel, including teachers, psychologists, etc. The staffing is used to communicate and explain test results and recommendations which are contained in a narrative style report and distributed to all in attendance. More importantly, however, the staffing is used to modify any recommendations that may be unrealistic and to solve problems that may be associated with implementing the plan. All who attend the staffing are asked to respond freely with suggestions for improving the plan since they are usually better acquainted with the student's history and behavior and will also be instrumental in following through with the plan of action. Before the staffing is terminated, the next step in habilitation process is identified along with the persons responsible for carrying it out.

### **Follow-up**

A brief follow-up questionnaire is completed by each referral source approximately 6 months after the evaluation takes place. Occasionally, RVAC is consulted later in the training process if the plan has been unsuccessful

and modifications are necessary or just for input when the student's program is at a turning point.

### **Impact**

RVAC has had a great impact on the education of disabled students in its first two years of operation. One of the most significant aspects of the service delivery model is that it operates from a non-biased objective position as a centrally located resource for many school districts. This has been found to be extremely effective with school districts, parents, and human service agencies, as the evaluator is able to maintain clear objectivity. The model has proved that an outside consultant has greater success at offering recommendations than a school-based evaluator because he or she is able to discuss sensitive habilitation issues that school personnel may feel uncomfortable with, given their close relationship with the student's family and their professional peers.

Confronted with initial resistance from school districts reluctant to use assessment because of previous disappointments, RVAC has educated many professionals and parents about accountable assessment and referrals tripled during the second year of operation.

A follow-up study conducted after the first year of operation received an 86% response rate. The study indicated that 50% of the referral sources were able to implement the vocational plan of action. The other 50% were unable to implement the plan because students left the district or the responsibility had shifted to another professional who had not been involved in the evaluation process. Eighty-six percent stated that vocational plans were based on available resources and 100% stated that they would utilize RVAC's services again.

### **Conclusion**

At the present time there is no established model for vocational assessment within the schools. While several models have been tried and professionals debate the assets and limitations of proposed models, a standard format has not been designed, tested, and adopted.

The Regional Vocational Assessment Center operates with a model which offers low cost, highly individualized and accountable services to many school districts through a central location in Washington state.

There are several goals that the RVAC plans to achieve in the future. First, while this model has proved to be effective, it has not been subjected to statistical scrutiny through research. Also, its location limits its service delivery to a specific geographic region and additional regional centers are needed in strategic locations throughout the state. Projects related to both these issues will be considered. Secondly, vocational assessment in the schools now takes on even greater importance with the federal government's new emphasis on transition, since evaluation is actually a link between a student and services. The RVAC hopes to continue its involvement in the transition process by utilizing vocational assessment as linkage between secondary and post-secondary vocational training programs.

With support from the state, RVAC has been able to offer direct service to school districts and their students. However, in keeping with their current policy to grant funds for direct service to school districts only, the RVAC's funding has been cut considerably. The response from districts who have relied upon services from the RVAC has been overwhelming and RVAC will be able to continue operating with support from districts who have recognized that vocational assessment is crucial in the vocational development of handicapped youth.

## REFERENCES

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