

helping students toward independence: the steps program at usdb

By Kimberley P. Smale

Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (USDB) serves students with varying abilities and needs. At the high school level, a range of transition services is required to help this diverse group of students prepare for life after high school. Three years ago, USDB established the STEPS program as part of this range of services. STEPS is a training and transition program geared toward students 16-21 years of age. It allows them to learn and practice real-life skills that will help them become contributing members of their community.

STEPS is designed for higher functioning or moderately disabled students who are planning to transition to independent living upon exiting the program. Students currently enrolled have a variety of disabilities, including a mixture of deafness, blindness, mild cognitive delays, or mild physical limitations. (Students with severe disabilities who would not benefit from college preparation planning, lessons in transit, or career learning opportunities do not participate in this program. These students benefit from a different type of transition planning and are eventually transferred to severe disability programs throughout the state.)

The Concept

The STEPS program concept was developed over several years by Trena Roueche', residential program/educational program director for USDB's Deaf North Division, using original ideas and components from transition programs nationwide. Several key concepts were adapted from the Texas School for the Blind transition plan. Curricula used in the program include Rubrics for Transition I: For Higher Function Students, Rubrics for Transition II: For Students with Moderate Disabilities, and Cooking to Learn I-III.

Transition Planning and Enrollment in STEPS

On or before each USDB student's 16th birthday, transition planning begins in earnest. Specialists or teachers interview the student to determine educational, career, and life goals; this includes a complete inventory of interests and talents. Each student's level of preparedness for independent living is also assessed. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team then meets to begin setting goals and planning for transition based on the interviews and inventories completed prior to the meetings. Students and their families are key members of the IEP team and discuss where they see themselves (or their child) in the future. The IEP team writes the transition plan and goals to reflect that vision. Services

Kimberley P. Smale is the public information official at the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (USDB). Questions and comments about this article are welcome and should be sent to Trena Roueche', residential program/educational program director for USDB's Deaf North Division, at trenar@usdb.org.



Photos courtesy of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind

provided in the STEPS program are written into the final IEP as part of the transition plan for students who would benefit from these services.

The transition plan and corresponding goals are reviewed and modified regularly until the student graduates or exits USDB programs. Some students require additional time with USDB after they complete their high school diplomas or certificate course requirements in order to set and meet independent living goals. Those students may continue to participate in the STEPS program until they exit USDB programs and are independent, or until their 22nd birthday, whichever comes first.

Program Components

The STEPS program offers both educational and career/trade components. The educational component is designed to assist students who are on an academic college track or planning to attend an applied technology college. These students attend training in daily living, self-advocacy, college success strategies, and other core transition training classes. They also receive help with college applications and scholarship paperwork.

Students who plan to pursue a career or trade after leaving USDB participate in the career/trade component. They receive job coaching from program specialists and are employed within the community at various temporary job placements with the ultimate goal of an offer of permanent employment at the end of the term. As students in the educational component do, students in this track also attend core curriculum classes on campus



designed to teach independent living skills.

The transition training classes include daily mini-courses taught on the USDB campus. These courses focus on budgeting, meal planning, responsible choice making, sex education, household maintenance, transportation, community resources, banking, laundry, shopping, and self-advocacy. Daily attendance is required for all STEPS participants and each student's progress is monitored carefully. When weaknesses are identified, transition specialists step in to offer extra help and counseling. The STEPS program offers several living options that include both campus apartment living and added educational components. The goal is to allow students to apply what they have learned in their life skills lessons, and to practice using various transit options and assistive technology, all with minimal supervision.



Planning to Exit

During the last years of USDB services, the transitioning student continues to prepare for independent living. At this time, the transition team completes an independent life skills inventory assessment to determine student readiness for independence. The student's money management, meal planning, shopping, cooking, and household management skills are evaluated and plans are made to improve on weak areas before the exit date. When students achieve a 95 percent or better on the life skills inventory, they graduate into



“USDB Apartment Living.” Students at this level of transition live independently on campus in dormitory apartments with 24-hour staff available for assistance during the week. On weekends, the apartments are unsupervised, but staff members are available on campus for five-hour shifts Friday and Saturday evenings and a staff member is on call for the rest of the weekend in case of emergency. In order to participate in the weekend unsupervised program, students must review a rules and procedures packet and sign a behavior contract. This time of short periods of independence with a safety net is an important step before students transition to independent living.

Near the end of their time with USDB, students move off campus into group or subsidized housing and apply for Section 8 vouchers if appropriate. These students enjoy minimal supervision from program staff that includes a daily visit or scheduled phone call each evening. Off-campus residents also return to attend independent living classes on campus each afternoon. As students transition completely out of USDB services and move into independent housing, USDB hosts an Open House to gather furniture and useful appliances that become the property of the students. This allows the students to start out with the essentials and to focus on job and personal success.

Early Signs of Success

The STEPS program was introduced into the USDB curriculum during the 2006-07 school year, and it is showing great promise with progressive student outcomes. Clarissa Reed, one of the first STEPS students, is an early success story. She is nearing program completion and attending the local applied technology college studying sheet metal trades. Clarissa completed the supervised cottage program and is currently living on her own in the community. She works part time for the USDB residential program when she isn't at school, and she is actively job hunting and preparing for full-time employment after graduation. Clarissa is successfully budgeting her time and money to meet commitments and has learned valuable communication skills to work with the outside world. She is arranging transportation, making appointments, and using a videophone and video relay services.

Nineteen students currently participate in the STEPS program, each with individual goals for success and a personalized transition plan. When students exit USDB, the goal is to have them set up in a home, employed, and completely ready for independence. We look forward to watching our students progress as they enter the world and use their skills for the big steps ahead of them in life!