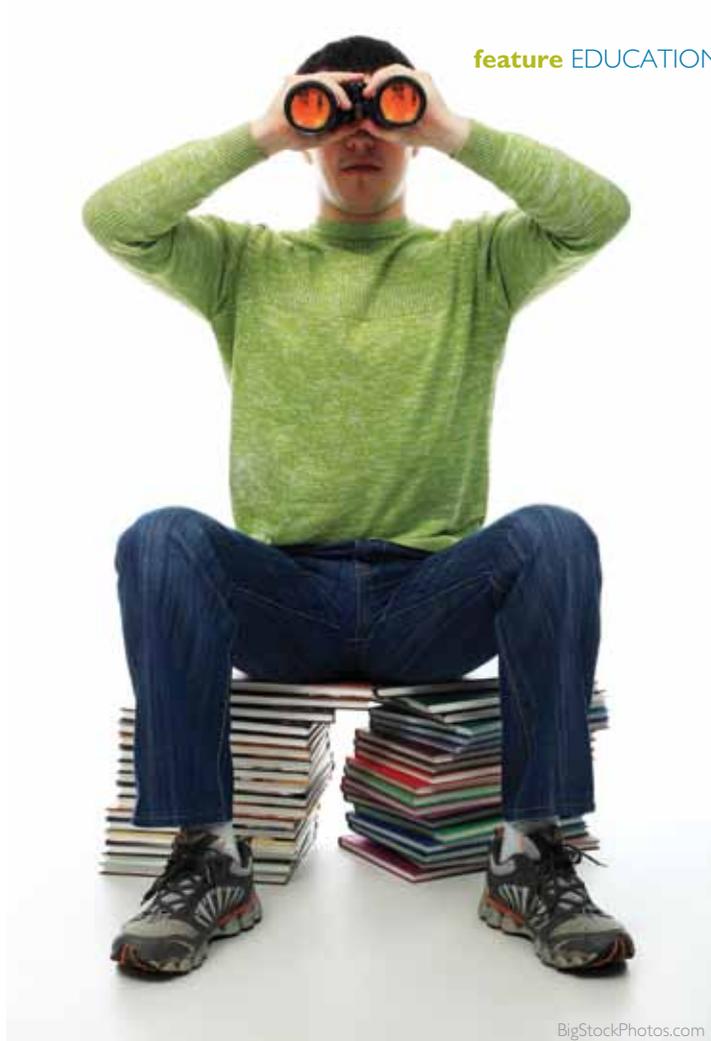


# Transitions

WE NEED TO SHIFT THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT TRANSITIONS.

by Tara Connolly, B.Ed., M.A., RP



**The transition to post-secondary can be a tough one, for anybody. For students with ASD, preparing for post-secondary and subsequently thriving once they get there can take some concerted effort and advanced planning. Effective transition supports also play a key role in supporting student success at post-secondary.**

**IT IS GOOD NEWS** that more students with ASD are entering the post-secondary system (Dipeolu, Storlie, & Johnson, 2015; McKeon, Alpern, & Zager, 2013; Zager & Alpern, 2010). Ontario has seen a rise in the number of students with ASD who have registered with Disability Services Offices on campus to access academic accommodations to which they are legally entitled. This good news story also brings a number of challenges, including how best to support the transition of students on the spectrum into the post-secondary environment.

This reality calls for us to think about transition support in a different way in order to best serve our students with ASD. I would like to suggest that a way to create more sustainable transitions is to recognize that multiple parties, foremost the student, have a role and responsibility in the transition, but they also experience it to greater and lesser degrees. When we acknowledge the “experience of transition” for the multiple players in the shift to post-secondary, we can then build capacity in all players and meaningfully support the process by delivering flexible services that recognize both the commonalities and uniqueness of transitions for students with ASD.

This type of innovative approach to transitions for students on the spectrum is being implemented through the two pilot projects running in Ontario, funded as a part of the 2013-14 Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development’s Action Plan (Brown, 2014). The two pilot sites, one at Algonquin College and one at York University, have been tasked with developing a robust and evidence-informed process for supporting the transitions of students with ASD into the post-secondary setting. Both sites have seen positive results and have reported their results to the Ministry for its consideration. While the two sites by necessity differ in the format of their service delivery, they have worked from the same core elements and guiding principles ultimately informing the transition process they have advised. I will highlight the work of the Algonquin site.



Of course, the primary focus is support provided directly to the student experiencing the transition to post-secondary. As an initial step, prospective students in early years of high school are welcome to visit the site and meet with staff to gain some information about the college setting and experience. For incoming students, transition days over the summer are provided to help students get a feel for the environment, hear from upper year students, learn about the services available to them, see presentations by professors, experience eating lunch in the cafeteria, visit key areas of the college and discuss issues such as stress management and self-advocacy.

The Transition Support Centre (TSC) is the core of the Algonquin pilot, serving as a drop-in space for first year students on the spectrum to access services that are meaningful to them, and as a tool to assist them in their individual transitions needs. It serves as an anchor of sorts, a place where students can come to ask questions, seek guidance on next steps, set up their academic accommodations, have appointments with Learning Strategists for support on building essential academic and study skills, seek coaching to deconstruct social situations or unwritten social rules in the post-secondary setting, work in a quieter space, socialize with other students, just chill and/or self-regulate.

Given that many students with ASD can struggle with reaching out, and with communicating their needs, there is much work done to let students know that when they are accessing the TSC their issues are understood, that their experience is validated and the space is one to share successes as well as talk out solutions to challenges. The staff of the TSC work to facilitate students accessing many spaces in the college and to gain an understanding of the TSC as one service among the many that are available to support the student as they navigate the full expanse of the campus community. The TSC is meant to be a safe haven – never a gilded cage – so that students can

begin to experience their college journey on their own terms.

We know that the literature on retention at post-secondary emphasizes the importance of students feeling a connection to the campus community through positive interaction and integration with students and faculty (Tinto, 1998). An important aspect of the TSC service delivery is the roll-out of social events that are student-informed and facilitated in a way that allows students to access the TSC for activities related to special interests and fun, in addition to the services it provides. The amount of socials offered and the variation in times that they are run is designed to include and appeal to as many students as possible. Students are welcome to attend and “just

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be.” This is an effective way to have students build familiarity and comfort with accessing the TSC drop-in space for any future needs and it provides a low stress, organic ground for connections and conversations to occur.

Notwithstanding the array of support directly provided to students, the work of the TSC is infused with the idea that the transition is not the student’s alone. Family information evenings are provided so that family members can become familiar with the services, policies and procedures at post-secondary, and can find some supportive suggestions on how to shift their advocacy role (as part of their own transition). Sessions for high-school teachers on preparing students for post-secondary and finding resources

for transition-related curriculum goals are offered several times a year so that educators can begin the preparation for transition to post-secondary as early as possible and can feel they have provided robust scaffolding to increase readiness skills. On campus, the transition of college faculty is facilitated through faculty professional development sessions and individual consultations that help faculty gain confidence in working with students on the spectrum and build excitement about the contributions of these students. The transition of student support service providers in the post-secondary community (such as counseling, security and health care) is facilitated through training sessions to help these key service providers understand some of the emerging issues students on the spectrum face and may reach out to them about.

Programs like the transition pilots at Algonquin College and York University are incredibly important as they facilitate students to continue building the skills they need to thrive at post-secondary and beyond, in a way that is student-focused and attends to the unique strengths and challenges of individuals on the spectrum. Post-secondary communities benefit from the engagement, creative thinking, contribution and participation of these students. Transition supports, like the Transition Support Centre, provide an additional service in the post-secondary community that students can access to support them in bringing their best to their post-secondary journey and to thrive in the post-secondary environment.

What do innovations in transition support at post-secondary mean to the student? Each student will use services



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differently and to varying degrees. The success at post-secondary is the student's; the transition supports are the tools the student uses to build her or his success. As one student reports: "Honestly, it [The TSC] was probably the most helpful thing when coming to college. I had amazing support, from wonderful staff. I made some great friends and had fun. It was also really helpful when I was having a day that was too much to handle, as it was a place I could go to kind of isolate myself if needed, since there were some great things to help manage my sensory problems" (Student, Cohort 2).

The pilot projects at Algonquin College and York University have supported 255 students on the spectrum to transition into the post-secondary environment. They are in the fourth and final year of funding due to end in April 2017.

*For information about the Algonquin pilot project, contact Tara Connolly, Coordinator, Transition Support Centre, Algonquin College, tara.connolly@algonquincollege.com.*

*For information about the York pilot project, contact Maureen Barnes, Manager, Learning Disability Services, York University, maureen@yorku.ca. ■*

## Autism in High School

Web-based guide

### For Immediate Release

#### KITCHENER, ONTARIO –

"Autism in High School" is a web-based resource guide to help students with autism and their families navigate the transitions and challenges of high school. The guide is divided into four main sections, each of which focuses on different common challenges:

- Transition into High School
- In High School
- Not Attending Classes
- Transition Out of High School

In each section, there are descriptions of challenges, suggested questions to help you plan for supports, and external resources for further investigation.

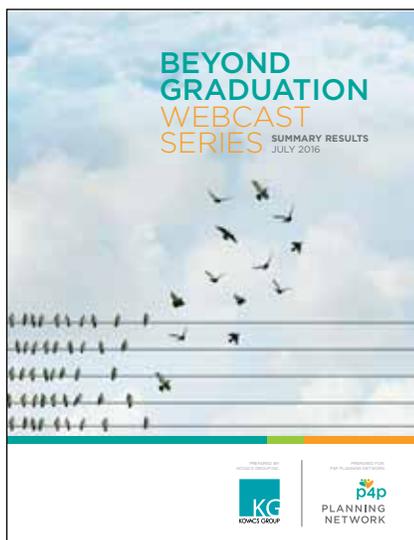
With generous funding from the Sifton Family Foundation, this website was developed as a joint initiative between Extend-A-Family, Waterloo Region Family Network, members of the former Autism Services Waterloo Region, the Waterloo Region District School Board, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, and the University of Waterloo.

Visit the website at <http://autisminhighschool.ca/>

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Partners for Planning, in partnership with the Toronto Catholic District School Board, produced a brand new webcast series focused on planning beyond graduation to support families in creating the best possible future for their child with a disability after high school. The webcast series contained three parts, each with a distinct focus:

- **Part 1: Reality Check** – A look at the types of supports available after graduation, new and innovative ways families are planning for the future, and strategies to enhance future wellbeing.
- **Part 2: Getting Involved and Staying Connected** – A discussion about caring relationships, opportunities to contribute in a meaningful way, and fulfilling personal goals after graduation.
- **Part 3: Raising the Bar on Employment** – Talking about individuals with a disability contributing by working and discussing practical strategies to move children toward work.

The webcast series was designed to inform, guide and inspire families, educators and supporters as they help young people living with a disability to transition from high school into adulthood. To learn more about the webcast series, including the methodology and the outcomes of the study, or if your school would like to participate, please visit [planningnetwork.ca](http://planningnetwork.ca).