Although typical transitions are from one vertical level of schooling to another, it is becoming increasingly common for transitions to also include moving between regular and alternative placements. Many high schools rely on alternate placements as a means of dealing with disruptive students. There is also a subcategory of placements for students who have a disability. Appropriate transitions in each of these demanding situations is essential to keep the placement from becoming a temporary dumping ground and leading the student to feel increasingly isolated. Other types of placements are voluntary, although these students need support during their transitions as well.

**Types of Transitions**

When dealing with a disruptive student who does not have a disability, it is incumbent on the school to create a safety net that will allow the student some degree of empowerment and dignity while delivering a consequence that will change the student’s negative behavior. In the case of expulsion, the school is often dealing with a student who sees the expulsion as a reward. Realistically, the school often feels that they are also being
rewarded because that particular student will not be disrupting instruction if he or she is expelled.

Although these feelings are certainly understandable, expulsion provides only short-term relief for the community. It requires only a small amount of forethought to provide a mechanism by which the expulsion can be regarded as a win-win proposition. Allowing the student the dignity of some small degree of choice—even if the choice is artificially contrived, such as arrival time at the alternative placement, choice of dress, or selection of subjects to be covered—will allow the student to feel a sense of control. In addition, a staff member who is not involved in the specific discipline process should be designated as an on-site advocate so the student immediately has someone in his or her corner.

When a student has a disability, it is essential that the school staff go beyond the letter of the law—or, in the case of a special education student, the volume of the law. A quick glance at IDEA 2004 quickly dispels the notion that any action can (or should) occur without significant due process; the legalities, however, don't necessarily address the value of creating a relationship with the student. The ultimate goal of any out-of-school placement must be finding the best possible environment for the student so that he or she becomes an effective and responsible citizen. The building blocks of this process begin in kindergarten but must be continued even in this less-than-desirable detour.

A more positive transition takes place when a student chooses to enroll in a nontraditional placement, such as an independent public or charter setting or a program within a traditional setting. The issue of choice is a huge factor in determining the student’s ability to function positively in the new placement. Attention to an appropriate transition, however, has no less impact.

**Placement Problems**

I recently conducted a survey in which staff members of the sending school reported a variety of unanticipated results from a lack of transition protocol. The program being evaluated was an alternative setting that was detached physically from a public high school. Students were allowed to enter—at the discretion of the principal—at any time during the school year. The program is for drop-out prevention and does not function as an alternative to expulsion, but many of the students had extensive disciplinary histories.

Staff members reported that even when students had been offered the alternative placement as an incentive, they often observed negative attitudes. If students knew that they would be leaving the traditional setting, they became even more uncooperative and thought, “Who cares—I won’t be around here much longer.” In other cases, students and teachers had no advance notice until the student simply disappeared from his or her class and the teacher received a transfer slip. In both scenarios, transition protocols for students and teachers were lacking.

Although in this case students chose their alternative placement, they did not have satisfactory explanations for their peers about why they were leaving school and where they were going. The alternative students realized that their peers thought that the alternative school was for “bad kids” or “retards.” This resulted in a loss of status, which could have been addressed in advance by the school administrators had they realized that this was an important part of the transition process.

Finally, staff members reported that follow-up on each student's progress in the alternative setting would have been appreciated. Many teachers were curious about how their students were functioning in the new setting—both academically and socially.

With the wonderfully clear vision provided by hindsight, I—working with the principal and the staff members—have created a protocol that addresses the concerns identified by both experience and the formal assessment. The alternative program, although newly created, has proven very successful, and the protocol described in the following pages has effectively provided the mechanism for a positive horizontal transition for both students and staff members.

**The Transition Protocol**

The alternative program was created by an advisory group of parents, teachers, and administrators. The group designed a program that had some aspects in place before the initial class members entered the program; other components evolved as

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needed. The following procedures are a combination of the original intent meshed with continual “in-flight” corrections.

Referral. Students can self-refer to the alternative program or be referred by a teacher or a parent. Either way, the referral must always be evaluated by a school counselor. The counselor reviews the student’s transcripts, discipline record, and overall attitude and makes a subjective judgment about the seriousness of the student’s intent to withdraw from school and the level of commitment the student has to earning a diploma in a nontraditional setting. It is essential that the counselor understands the rigor and expectations of the alternative program so he or she can make a realistic prediction of the student’s success.

The gatekeeper. If the counselor believes that the student is a good candidate, he or she is then referred to the principal, who acts as a gatekeeper. To maintain continuity and consistency of the process, only one person should assume this role. This easily overlooked component is actually the most important juncture in a positive transition.

The principal meets with the student and his or her parents to take a realistic look at the alternative placement and whether or not the student will be successful in it. It is essential for the principal to share both the positive and negative aspects of the placement, including the possibility of negative peer reaction, so the student experiences no surprises. The principal might even rehearse possible responses with the student that he or she might make when people question why the student is going to the alternative setting. The student should also consider what he or she may miss by leaving a traditional school. If the student and his or her parents agree that they want the student to enter the alternative program, they sign a contract that outlines expectations. This procedure shows the student and his or her parents that they are supported by a unified group of professionals who are committed to helping the student earn a high school diploma.

Communication. Each staff member who interacts with the student in the traditional setting should be notified of the student’s pending move—including the date of the transfer and some idea of the reason behind the move. This enables the staff members to say good-bye to the student and also helps mitigate the feeling that the current staff didn’t do enough to support the student.

Once the student has settled in at the alternative placement, he or she is added to a spreadsheet that lists the students, the credits they have earned, and their vocational or service placement. A copy of this spreadsheet is sent to the principals and the high school counselors every month. Teachers are encouraged to contact counselors for these updates or to direct questions to the alternative school director. Many teachers follow the progress of their former students, and some even visit students at the alternative placement site to express their support.

A Net of Support
Although having a protocol in place for horizontal transfers is necessary, communicating both its existence and its relevance to the entire staff is almost as important if the school community is to be a unified safety net for students who leave their traditional setting and move to a nontraditional—often off-site—setting. To address this, I make a presentation to the entire secondary staff during the first-day-of-school staff meeting. At this time, we review the protocol and I share some examples of student success and urge staff members to ask specific questions. I emphasize the fact that we are working together for the good of our students. This proactive approach has resulted in an increase in the number of positive comments about the alternative school and a substantial increase in the number of appropriate referrals by teachers.

There are many possible responses to transition issues. Ignoring the issues that transitions raise—even the horizontal transitions discussed in this article—deprives both the student and the school of the opportunity to create a positive experience for everyone. Creating a process that supports students in stressful transition times has the potential of reaping enormous dividends. PL