

A New Way of Thinking ~ A Guide for Middle School Transition Planning

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Sadly, many of you will not be surprised by the responses given to a survey conducted by the CESA #2 Transition Program. The question, "How did (do) you feel about your disability while in middle and high school?" received the following results:

1. I'm stupid.
2. I'm not normal.
3. I won't have friends because of my disability.
4. I'll never be popular and no one will ever like me.
5. Everyone is looking at me because of my disability.
6. I will never go to college.
7. My teachers do not understand me.
8. Life is not fair, it's hard.
9. I will never amount to anything.
10. I am not as important as my peers.
11. I wish I was smart.
12. Everyone thinks I'm dumb anyways, why try?
13. I can't do anything right, I'm stupid.
14. I read too slow to be smart.
15. There is no point.
16. I am a loser, I'm not normal.
17. I am a disappointment.
18. I am not meant for school.
19. Life sucks, why me?
20. Just let me be!

The shocking news is that several students e-mailed their replies in a matter of minutes, many of them having 8-15 answers. These replies were automatic. A few parents also responded to the survey. Parents reported that they had no idea their child still had these strong feelings. They thought their child was comfortable with who they are. Many of the youth replying were in college, high school or currently working in their communities with successful careers. Despite being successful in college or in careers, many reported they still had these same feelings of not being equal to their peers and co-workers.

As we talked with students and educators, we found that students do not understand their disability in its entirety. In other words, students do not understand why they have a disability or what that means for their lives. While working with students in middle and high school, I have heard the following responses to the question, "What is your disability?" I don't have one; I don't really know, but I have to go to these classes; I laugh too much; I'm stupid; and the list goes on..... There are students who can tell you what their disability is; however they are not in the majority. We need to educate our students about their disability and what that means in order to give them the power to fulfill their dreams.

Recognizing this need, we created “A New Way of Thinking Guide” to assist middle school teachers to help educate their students with disabilities about their disabilities. The five-chapter guide includes the following:

Chapter 1 - Guess What, You Have a Disability: Definition of disability; Types of disabilities; Who Am I – Identify and describe the student’s disability; What does my disability mean to me?; and Who do I talk to about my disability?

Chapter 2 - Automatic Negative Thoughts, (ANTs): Recognizing **ANTs** - Learning how to change the way you think in order to feel better about yourself; Understanding **ANTs** Principles; **ANTs** Species; **ANTs** Therapy - Combat your negative thoughts through feeding good thoughts to your anteater.

Chapter 3 – Assessment: What is an Assessment?; What is the difference between formal and informal assessments?; What are the different types of assessments?; What is an accommodation?

Chapter 4 - Self Advocacy: Speaking up for yourself; 4 Keys to being a good self-advocate; Self-Advocacy DOs and Don’ts; How to find supports; Help in School-IEPs; Transition Planning in the IEP.

Chapter 5 - Self-Empowerment: What is Empowerment?; What is IDEA?, What is an IEP?; How you can get involved in your IEP?; What is transition planning in the IEP?

The guide is complete with learning points, materials needed for each chapter, teacher talking points, teacher preparation sections, several activities, and resources. This is a guide educators can use in their classrooms immediately.

Our first trial run of the “A New Way of Thinking” concept was conducted in May 2010. The CESA #2 Transition Program held a workshop with 30 eighth-grade students based on the concepts of students understanding their disability, and automatic negative thoughts (ANTs). This workshop was presented using ice breakers, activities, discussion, live music performance by The Figureheads, and breakout workshops that included writing lyrics, poetry and creating beats. Workshop evaluations from the students showed a 100% rating of overall satisfaction. Lyrics were created through the breakout sessions to develop an ANTs song, which is now featured in the guide. This song is unique, as it is written by The Figureheads with the thoughts and voices of the 8th grade students from the workshop. Another activity sparked the interest of the students as they built a wall of their personal ANTs (written on small cardboard boxes) and knocked it down to symbolize breaking through the walls of their automatic negative thinking.

Next, it was the educators’ turn to give their thoughts and ideas. A half-day training for Transition Coordinators and a full-day training for middle school educators in the CESA #2 area were held. Evaluations show that teachers found the guide very user-friendly, and the content was well received. All participants at the educators’ training said they would use the guide in

their classroom. Many participants commented that the guide will help students better understand themselves in the transition process.

We believe a better understanding of one's disability and the removal of ANTs will help students with disabilities assess their interests and skills, learn to be a self-advocate and feel empowered. When a student changes the way they think about things, the things they think about change. Future use of the guide will demonstrate the impact on student attitude and self empowerment.

The guide was developed in CESA #2 with resources from the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) 2011. SPDG in part, offers resources to help improve personnel development related to transition for educators who work with students with disabilities.

The guide is based on the two primary resources listed below. The Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network has an outstanding resource toolkit focusing on effective transition planning, and was developed by youth with disabilities for youth with disabilities. The resources from Daniel G. Amen, MD provide supports based on how the brain works. We specifically focused in on Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) and how to change the way one thinks about themselves and others.

The resources used to complete this guide include:

- The Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network .The Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network: Secondary Transition Toolkit (Developed by youth for youth)
<http://pyln.org/wpcontent/uploads/2010/07/PYLN2ndTransitionToolkit.pdf>
- Daniel G. Amen MD, Resources ANTS, "Change Your Brain Change Your Life",
<http://www.amenclinics.com/clinics/> 888-564-2700.

Special thanks to the Wisconsin youth who shared their stories, the PLYN, and Dr. Amen for sharing his resources to develop this guide.

This guide is a living working document. It can be found on the CESA #2 webpage at <http://www.cesa2.k12.wi.us/programs/transition/tanresources.cfm>. Please send information, comments or ways to improve the guide to Pam Jenson, CESA #2 Transition Consultant at pamjenson@cesa2.k12.wi.us. We value your support and suggestions to make this guide effective for educators, students and parents.