

Successful Transitions: From an RTC or Therapeutic Boarding School to a Traditional School

by Pamela Tedeschi, MEd, IECA (MD)



Many students need therapeutic care during the middle school or early high school years, but they are not old enough for college when they graduate from the residential therapeutic school or program. Those students must be ready to complete high school in a more

traditional school.

It can be difficult going back home from a therapeutic school. It is almost never a good idea for a student to go back to the same school that he or she attended before the therapeutic setting. The temptations from the old peer group can be difficult, and there may not be enough social life on the weekends. Often the best option after a therapeutic school is a traditional boarding school. Everything the student needs is on campus—e.g., classes, sports, and supervised study halls. It gives the student a fresh start in a new, welcoming community and helps him or her prepare for college living. The student is also less likely to slip into the old patterns that led to the therapeutic placement. A small independent day school may work as well as long as the student has meaningful activities after school. Unfortunately, the financial costs of attending a therapeutic school may make attending a subsequent independent day or boarding school impossible. If the student will be attending a public school, the parents should try to have the student transferred to a nearby public or charter school to give him or her a fresh start.

THE TRANSITION TEAM

Students have the best chance for success when the therapeutic program, the parents, the independent educational consultant (IEC), and the traditional school all work as a team. Each member of this team has responsibilities that contribute to an overall successful outcome.

Therapeutic School

The therapist and educational director at the therapeutic program should keep the IEC and the parents well-informed about the student's progress in classes, the milieu, and therapy. The team of parents, the IEC, and the therapeutic program's therapist and educational coordinator must agree that the student is ready to graduate and can be successful in a less restrictive environment. The educational director should carefully put together a transcript

that accurately shows the student's completed, graded courses. New testing may be needed for accommodations and for admission to an independent school.

A few additional considerations will help the student be prepared. Even if the therapeutic program's policy is not to assign homework, when the student is getting ready to transition increasing amounts of homework should gradually be assigned. The student can complete it in a study hall or during free time so that it won't be overwhelming to be placed in a new setting with required homework.

Students in therapeutic programs also participate in a lot of group therapy and share things that would not be appropriate in other settings. The therapist may need to help the student understand when and what to share about themselves in a less restrictive environment.

Graduation should be at a time when the student can start a semester or school year or during the summer. Graduating from a therapeutic program in March or mid-November, for example, creates problems with schedules. A student might have to wait until the next trimester or semester to start at the new school and then will have too much time at home. Even if the student is starting at a public school, coming in halfway through a semester or a quarter means that he or she will start off missing the beginning concepts. That could be overwhelming.

Parents

Parents should work closely with the professionals to determine the appropriate time for the student to graduate. They should participate in parent workshops; set a home contract with input from the therapist and student; meet with their student's consultant to discuss appropriate next schools; and set up a time for the student to meet with the IEC, either at the program or during a home pass.

IEC

The IEC should carefully review all available information and be in touch with the therapeutic program about the student's progress. The IEC should determine whether the student will need a school with learning support and how often the student will need to meet with a therapist in the beginning. The student and the IEC should discuss classes and types of activities and

clubs that are of interest to the student—the student will find others with similar interests and become part of the community faster if he or she gets involved. After the very structured setting of a therapeutic school, the student will have more free time and getting involved in school activities will help keep him or her busy.

The IEC must listen to the parents' expectations while also helping them learn about various school options. If the student will be attending an independent school, the IEC must be sure that the school is willing to take a student who is graduating from a therapeutic program. Some schools will accept students on an individual basis, depending on why the student was in a therapeutic setting and whether the student can be successful. Some schools have a blanket policy of never accepting such students. It is important that the school is open to considering the student and has supports in place, such as a counselor and learning support services. The IEC must make sure the school knows the student's academic strengths and other talents and how the student would be involved in the school life. It is regrettable when a director of admissions only focuses on the therapeutic issues in the interview rather than getting to know the student.

The IEC should help the student and parents prepare for what is expected in the admission process and what to look for and ask during the visit and interview. If it is a boarding school, the IEC should determine whether the school has an appropriate counselor. If not, do students meet with therapists from the community? Is transportation provided or does the therapist come to campus? Transcripts and testing should be shared. If the admission committee has all of the information and accepts the student, the IEC should feel satisfied that the school will work with the student.

Traditional School

The last part of the team is the traditional school. Students from a therapeutic placement usually do best in a smaller school where they can get more individual attention. The admission department, learning support director (if needed), and counselor should communicate with the IEC and the therapeutic school. They must ensure that the school can meet the needs of the student academically and socially and can get the student involved in the community. The student's advisor must be carefully chosen. Questions that must be answered include, What classes does the student need to graduate? Will the student need to take classes over the summer? What nonacademic interests does the student have? What worked best at the therapeutic school? What causes stress?

Each student coming from a therapeutic school must be viewed as an individual. Therapeutic issues should not be the focus of the interview with the director of admission. The student coming from a therapeutic school has made mistakes, grown, and is ready to be involved in the new school or the IEC would not be considering a less restrictive environment. Just because one student from a particular therapeutic program flourished or failed at this school, does not mean the next student will follow the same path.

BEST RESULTS

There are no guarantees that any student will be 100% successful—he or she is still a teenager, after all. But a student who graduates successfully from a therapeutic program with supportive parents, an invested IEC, and both the therapeutic school and traditional school as part of the transition team has the best chance to assimilate into the new school.

Pamela Tedeschi can be reached at pamela@pmtedcon.com.