

# The RENEW Model: Supporting Transition-Age Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Challenges

by JoAnne M. Malloy\*

According to the Alliance for Excellence in Education (2007), approximately 30% of high school students do not graduate on time each year, and the dropout rate is nearly 50% among African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic youth, and students with emotional or behavioral challenges (Krezmien, Leone & Achilles, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In addition, students with disabilities and students from ethnically diverse communities are more than twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as other students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These

We know that effective approaches for transition-age youth focus on helping youth develop caring, reciprocal relationships and on building self-efficacy and self-determination so that each youth will be invested in the difficult work of graduating from school, working in the community, and maintaining family relationships (Benz, Yovanoff & Doren, 1997; Bullis et al., 1993; Carter et al., 2006; Eisenman, 2007; Wagner & Davis, 2006; Walker & Gowen, 2011). What is needed for these youth are research-based interventions with a strong philosophy of positive behavior support and positive youth development. This paper describes one

problems for them in school and other settings, including verbal or physical aggression, depression, irritability, impulsivity, inability to concentrate, low self-esteem, and anxiety. Studies of youth who have emotional and behavioral impairments show that they are three times more likely to be arrested and four times more likely to drop out of school than typically developing youth, and they also experience poor academic performance and outcomes, have high rates of mental health concerns, and are more likely to be living in low-income families or in out-of-home placements (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Lane et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2005). A significant majority of youth with emotional and behavioral challenges have experienced at least one traumatic event, and many have experienced multiple traumatic events or complex trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2003).

There are disproportionate numbers of youth and young adults with emotional and behavioral disorders in jails, prisons, and on probation (Greenberg, Dunleavy & Kutner, 2007; Quinn et al., 2005). Often, these youth are involved in multiple, disjointed systems with disparate missions and approaches, resulting in ineffective and inefficient service delivery (Stroul & Friedman, 1994). In addition, youth with emotional and behavioral challenges often have co-occurring disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning disabilities (Forness et al., 1996; Mattison & Felix, 1997) and experience social and relational problems at far greater rates than other youth (Lane et al., 2006). Most young people with emotional and behavioral challenges also lack access to the personal, social, family, and community resources that are available to typical youth. In addition, adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders often do not seek treatment and have a myriad of difficulties that are resistant to change (Stroul & Friedman, 1994). The National Institute of Mental Health Advisory Council (2001) indicates that no other category of mental illness damages so many children so seriously.

There is evidence that some environments and contexts exacerbate the

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disparities contribute to a widening social divide between youth and young adults who have resources to support them through a productive and fulfilling school-to-adult-life transition and those who do not.

The needs of transition-age youth with emotional and behavioral challenges are complex and multidimensional, resulting in high rates of disengagement and social isolation. These difficulties include:

- Academic failure;
- Alienation from family;
- Juvenile justice involvement;
- Substance abuse;
- Early parenting; and
- Reliance on public assistance (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004; Lane et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004; Sabornie et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2005).

such intervention: Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural Supports, Education, and Work (RENEW), and describes its implementation in various contexts and settings in New Hampshire. RENEW has a growing evidence base supporting its individualized, youth-driven, strengths-based school-to-adult-life approach. The description of RENEW in this paper includes the key features and values of the model, the implementation process, various contexts and settings in which RENEW has been implemented, and several studies of the model. It also includes a case study of one youth's experience with RENEW, reviews the implications for practice, and discusses the need for further research and development.

## Social and Institutional Disengagement

Youth with emotional and behavioral challenges comprise a diverse population that is defined less by diagnoses or disability than by impaired levels of functioning at home, in school, and in the community (Friedman et al., 1996). Youth with emotional and behavioral challenges tend to exhibit a variety of behaviors that cause

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problems faced by youth with emotional and behavioral challenges. In the educational community, school organizational and cultural factors such as inconsistent discipline policies, teacher beliefs about students with learning and emotional challenges, differential or subjective treatment of students, and a lack of high academic expectations contribute to student alienation and high dropout rates (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkham, 2001; Gottfredson, Gottfredson & Hybl, 1993; Patterson, Hale & Stessman, 2007; Rumberger, 2001). The effects of trauma and repeated disruptions in home and relationships contribute to the dysfunction of these children and youth long into adulthood (Geenen et al., 2007; Walker & Gowen, 2011).

In the wake of concerns about violence and bullying in schools, many schools have tried to increase school safety by implementing zero tolerance policies. It is clear, however, that zero tolerance has not produced safer schools or more effective learning environments (ACLU, 2008). In fact, these harsh policies have only increased the numbers of youth who disengage from the educational process. Research on suspension indicates that, despite its frequent use, it is not effective in reducing the behavioral problems it is intended to address (Civil Rights Project, 2000; McFadden & Marsh, 1992). Suspension from school has been reported as a major predictor of dropping out of school (DeRidder, 1991; Skiba & Noam, 2001). Exclusionary zero tolerance policies may serve to remove students with behavior problems from the classroom, but as Fuentes (2003, p. 1) states:

Legal and education experts are blaming zero tolerance for what they call the “school to prison pipeline.” If yesteryear’s prank got a slap on the wrist, today those wrists could be slapped with handcuffs.

The trajectories are particularly negative for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders, who are placed in segregated educational settings at four times the rate of other students with disabilities (U. S. Department of Education, 2006; Wagner & Davis, 2006). Punishment and exclusion send the message to these youth that they do not belong in school. Instead of having a rehabilitative effect, exclusionary responses serve to reinforce the youth’s disengagement from, and lack of investment in, his or her wider community. We know that students drop out of high school in part because they believe that no one cares, and

as a result, they do not feel they can succeed in the school environment (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006; Kortering & Brazier, 1999).

### **The Importance of Positive Contexts and Environments**

Rather than continue to repeatedly expose youth with emotional and behavioral challenges or those who are in high-risk groups to negative environments and experiences, children’s mental health and child welfare experts advocate for positive youth development (PYD) approaches that focus on building upon each youth’s strengths and on creating or strengthening his or her social support network (Stroul & Freidman, 1994; Walker & Gowen, 2011). Effective interventions for these youth

for school-to-career transition that help them to complete their secondary education in community-based environments (Kutash & Duchonowski, 1997). These “alternative” models make use of any and all learning environments, are flexible and individualized around community-based competencies with academic relevance, link learning to employment, and pull together multiple agencies, systems, resources, and plans so that the young person can use his or her resources effectively.

What is needed are approaches that support youth who are having difficulties socially and academically, help youth to develop positive, reciprocal relationships, and help youth to create positive self-views and visions of their future prospects. There are emerging examples of these interventions that have

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***Researchers also advocate that youth with emotional and behavioral challenges receive individualized options for school-to-career transition that help them to complete their secondary education in community-based environments.***

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require flexible, individualized responses beginning with an intentional focus to engage the youth. Interventions should include life skill and relationship development, as well as resource building (Lehr, Sinclair & Christenson, 2004; Walker & Gowen, 2011). A strengths-based approach focused on supports and services will ensure that each youth can develop a positive self-view and future orientation while remaining in his or her home and community school (Eber & Keenan, 2004; Stroul & Friedman, 1986). To accomplish this vision, youth with emotional and behavioral challenges need to develop self-determination skills and experiences, including opportunities to set goals, make decisions, problem solve, and seek help (Carter et al., 2006; Eisenman, 2007).

Researchers in the field of secondary transition and employment recommend that services for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders have a vocational focus, include “real world” learning, be individualized, and be strengths-based (Benz et al., 1997; Bullis et al., 1993; Wagner & Davis, 2006). Researchers also advocate that youth with emotional and behavioral challenges receive individualized options

similar features, including an emphasis on youth voice and choice, a focus on strengths, the provision of unconditional care, and the building of natural supports in a community-based environment (Walker & Gowen, 2010). RENEW is one such example of a positive, values-driven approach to assisting transition-age youth.

### **RENEW: A Positive Approach to Youth Transition**

The RENEW model was developed in 1996 in New Hampshire by researchers at the Institute on Disability and Keene State College as part of a federally funded demonstration project. The first RENEW project was designed with input from an interagency advisory team comprising representatives from the state’s National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) affiliate, vocational rehabilitation, the community technical college, the Manchester School District, the state Division of Behavioral Health, the state Division of Children, Youth and Families, the Manchester Mental Health Agency, and the Child and Family Services Agency. The project team incorporated best-practice models and strategies from a variety of disciplines, including children’s mental

health (System of Care and Wraparound), education (school-to-career planning and innovative crediting using work-based learning strategies), and developmental disabilities (self-determination and personal futures planning), and created a comprehensive model that was built around five principles, eight strategies, and four outcomes (see Figure 1).

**The Five Principles.** The RENEW principles reflect the values of positive behavior support and positive youth development. They include:

1. An emphasis on self-determination such as choice making, problem solving, planning, self-knowledge, and help seeking;
2. Community inclusion focusing on the belief that youth should be supported to live in the community of their choice with an emphasis on developing natural supports;
3. Unconditional care with an emphasis on supporting the youth to work toward their goals at their own pace and to their own expectations and capabilities;
4. Strengths-based planning so that youth are focused on the development of their assets in order to build self-efficacy; and
5. Flexible resources based on the belief that supports should be designed

according to what the youth needs, and not according to what is available.

**The Eight Strategies.** The RENEW facilitator chooses various tools derived from the school-to-career, children's mental health, and disability fields to assist each youth to reach his or her goals and meet his or her needs for support. The key strategies include:

1. Developing youth choice and self-knowledge reflected in the personal "futures planning" process;
2. Individualized team development and facilitation designed to help each youth build and access the services and supports necessary to achieve his or her goals;
3. Braided (individualized) development of resources—again, based on the youth's individual goals and needs;
4. Flexible, individualized education programming and supports;
5. Individualized school-to-career planning with activities linked to each youth's longer term vocational or career goal;
6. Naturally supported employment including real jobs for typical wages;
7. Facilitated workplace or career-related mentoring in naturally occurring settings; and

8. Building sustainable community connections for when the youth moves on to life after high school.

**The Four Outcomes.** The RENEW design includes four measurable outcomes. They are:

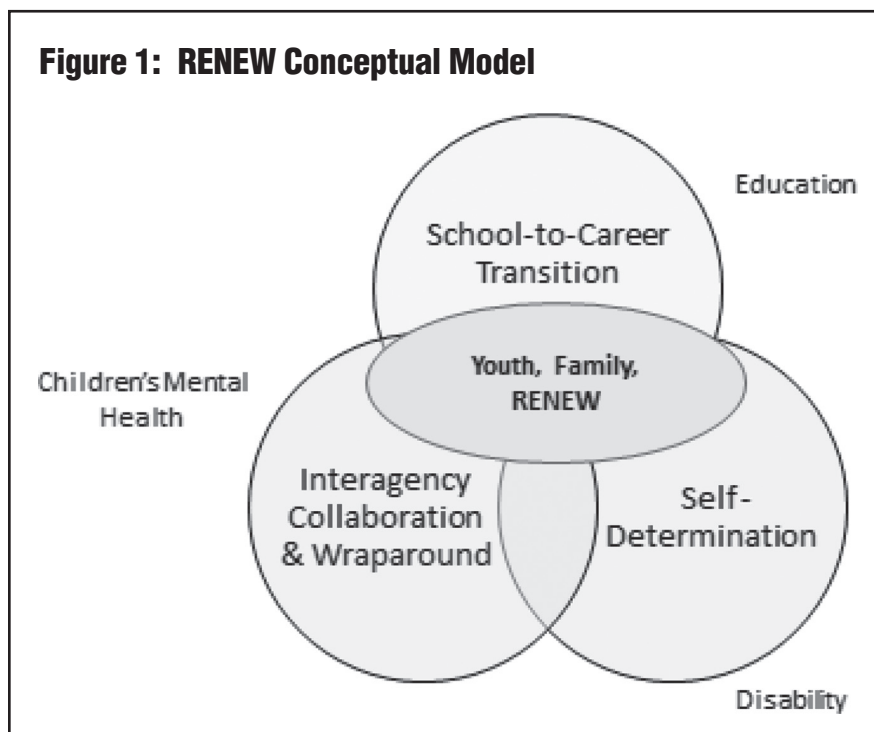
1. The successful attainment of a secondary level credential, including a regular high school diploma, a general equivalency diploma (GED), or other degree recognized by the state;
2. Enrollment in postsecondary education, including degree programs, but also college-level coursework, specific vocational programs, apprenticeship studies, and individually designed training after high school;
3. Employment in typical jobs for competitive wages either full or part time; and
4. Community inclusion including improvement in positive reciprocal relationships, increased stability in residence, and participation in clubs and community groups, among others activities.

The strategies and values of the RENEW model have been intentionally chosen to address the research on the needs of youth with emotional or behavioral challenges, including the need to:

- Develop self-determination skills and experiences;
- Link goals with school and community experiences;
- Develop supports and skill building to form positive social relationships;
- Build developmentally appropriate education/learning, employment, and social experiences;
- Engage and identify with home, school, or community members, institutions, and processes;
- Build resources (cultural, social, and human); and
- Link with supports such as tutoring, mentoring, social and behavioral skills training, employment programs, alternative educational programming, and special education (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2006; Eisenman, 2007; Wagner & Davis, 2006; Wagner et al., 2005; Wehman, 1996).

### The RENEW Support Process: Implementation

The RENEW process occurs in four phases, with strategies and tools chosen to



facilitate each phase. Each youth works with a RENEW facilitator who has been trained in the futures planning process, meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, and access to community and school resources and who will support the youth through each phase of the process. Schools and agencies that provide RENEW are encouraged not to exclude any youth who needs tertiary level supports and transition planning from participating in RENEW. Once a youth is identified as in need of tertiary level supports, the facilitator engages that youth in a conversation about the RENEW process, and once consent to participate is given by the youth and family, the facilitator schedules the first planning meetings with the youth and a few other individuals whom the youth has chosen to participate. This group is the youth's core team.

**Phase 1: Engagement and Personal Futures Planning.** The primary tool that is used to engage the youth is a form of person-centered planning that is called "personal futures planning" (Cotton, 2003; Mount, 1992; Pearpoint, Hale & Stessman, 1992). The person-centered planning process has a long history of application in the disability community and is designed to help the youth create meaningful, personalized, and individualized goals based upon a conversation that captures the vision in the young person's words. The facilitator uses graphic facilitation techniques to capture on flip chart paper the youth's responses to various open-ended questions about:

- The youth's history or story;
- The current situation;
- Strengths and accomplishments;
- Preferences (what works and what does not work);
- People in the youth's life and the youth's social connections;
- Dreams and hopes (as with typical youth, the courage to dream is a rite of passage for all adolescents);
- Concerns and barriers (to account for roadblocks when planning);
- Goals; and
- A detailed strategy or action plan.

The futures planning process is designed to engage each youth in the creation and pursuit of a plan that is based upon the individual's unique strengths, needs, and preferences in order to create a change in his or her life. This type of planning is an important element and contributes to the successful transition of youth with disabilities

from school to adult life (Sanderson, 2000; Wehmeyer & Sands, 1998).

Through the futures planning process, the youth constructs a narrative that includes:

- A definition of success;
- Self-reflection on how he or she responds to different challenges and situations;
- A description of the connections between the youth's difficulties and the environment;
- The social contexts as seen by the youth; and
- The tasks that the youth needs to complete in order to be successful.

The RENEW process is structured so that the facilitator concentrates on the youth's narrative and strengths, accomplishments, resources, and needs and minimizes the focus on deficits and past mistakes. Most youth with whom we have worked articulate dreams that reflect a typical and happy existence, such as having a job, a car, a satisfying relationship, pets, and a home.

with fidelity, is designed to build youth self-determination skills. As noted by Eisenman (2007, p. 3):

Theory, research, and practice have suggested that to keep youth in school, educators must encourage students' perceived competence and self-determination. They can do this by teaching students the component skills of self-determination in autonomy-supportive school environments and by helping students to apply their developing self-determination skills to self-identified goals.

Futures planning is a constructivist process. In other words, the process allows the youth to develop a shared understanding with the facilitators and others on his or her core team about his/her perceptions and goals for the future.

**Phase 2: Team and Plan Development.**

The second phase of the RENEW process involves bringing key individuals to the table for the express purpose of helping

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Most youth indicate that they want to finish high school and then go on to college, a training program, or employment. Many youth indicate a desire to pursue a particular career. With the longer range goals in mind, the facilitator can help the youth focus on shorter term objectives related to completing high school and vocational experiences. These vocational goals become a significant and specific focal point for the work of the youth, facilitator, and the soon-to-be developed team. Vocational interests guide the focus on courses of study (e.g., to be a nurse, for example, the student should take high school biology classes) and afterschool employment, work-based learning experiences, and internships.

Effective modeling of futures planning requires a facilitator who possesses both technical and relational skills, including personal characteristics such as empathy, ability to listen and understand from the individual's perspective, and a high level of cultural competence (Amado & McBride, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). The futures planning process, when conducted

the youth achieve his or her stated goals. The youth's parent or another close family member is always invited to be a member of the team. The team may also include school counselors, teachers, special educators, administrators, friends, and mental health providers. The youth is encouraged to, and often does, take charge of the meetings. Team members are prepared and oriented by the facilitator before the meeting to the process and mission of the team, which is to help the youth achieve his or her goals. During these initial meetings, the youth presents his or her futures plan to the team, and members engage in problem solving, recommend courses of action, and identify how they will help the youth achieve his or her goals. The group agrees on meeting logistics and indicators of success, including action steps, timeframes, and data to be reviewed.

During Phase 2, the youth, facilitator, and team conduct a credit gap analysis that identifies if the student is on or off track for graduation and what coursework the youth needs to take to graduate with the desired

type of diploma. The youth and team also prioritize the needs to be addressed and in what order. For example, a student may have indicated that he wants to be a mechanic and go into the district's vocational program, but the student needs some prerequisite courses and needs to apply for the vocational program. Once the priorities are identified, the team then helps the student develop a specific set of action steps. The goals may include getting a job, setting up work-based learning opportunities (including paid or unpaid internships for credit), developing individualized learning opportunities for credit, and other creative ways to help the youth toward high school graduation. The team agrees to short- and midterm action steps, sometimes with weekly deadlines. This plan becomes the basis for team meeting agendas.

**Phase 3: Implementation and Monitoring.** Based on the action plan, the team convenes to monitor progress toward the action steps, midrange objectives, and longer term goals. Not all team members may need to meet all the time, but key members will typically meet weekly in the beginning to gauge progress toward the goals and to make sure that everyone, including the

youth, is following through with his or her assignments. These check-in sessions focus on specific shorter term objectives, such as turning in math class assignments, applying for a job, or talking to the guidance counselor about specific coursework for a chosen occupation. Data are typically brought to the meetings, such as attendance data, class progress reports, or analysis of occupational requirements. As problems are identified (e.g., incomplete assignments), the team brainstorms solutions and develops strategies to reach the goal. If the student is not making progress, the facilitator may take the student through all or part of the futures planning process again. Adolescence is a time of constant exploration and development, and many youth may change their ideas about their futures and their goals. The team adjusts to the youth's changes, within reason, and as progress is monitored, the team may recommend resetting the short-term action steps.

**Phase 4: Transition.** If the data show that the youth is making significant progress without the need for frequent team meetings, the team may decide to turn the monitoring over to one person who is in a position to follow the youth's progress and

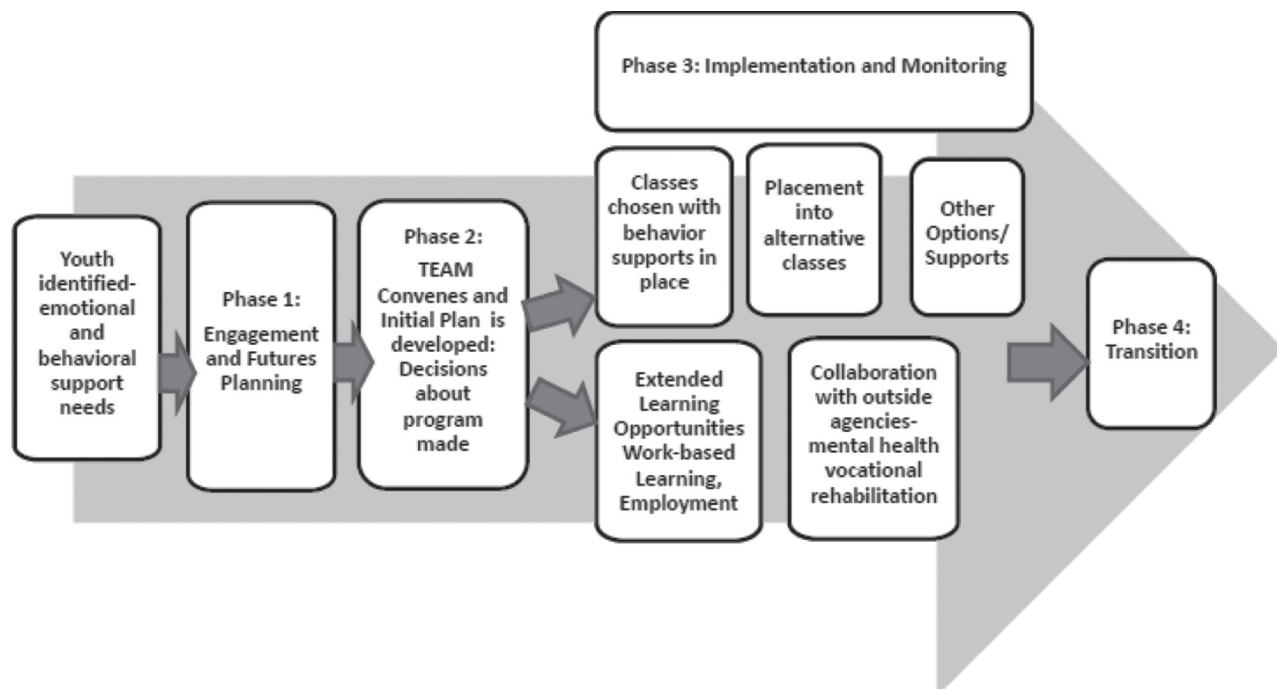
who can reconvene the team at any time. This may be a school counselor, a mental health provider, a family member, or a special education teacher. During this time, the designated person is in frequent contact with the youth and monitors the youth's progress in the agreed upon indicators, such as school progress, community participation (e.g., staying out of trouble), employment, or relations at home. The youth has the option of working with other team members or reconvening the team. If the data show that the youth is falling behind, the designated person can also reconvene the team to problem solve.

Figure 2 depicts the phases of RENEW intervention, including the individualized planning and decision-making process leading to choices about educational and vocational programming.

**Studies of RENEW**

Research on RENEW has shown positive results over multiple cohorts. The first demonstration project showed promising outcomes using school completion, employment, and youth satisfaction as the primary measures (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney et al., 1998; Cheney, Malloy & Hagner,

**Figure 2: RENEW Service Process**



1998; Hagner, Cheney & Malloy, 1999). The first demonstration also included in-depth case studies illustrating how participating youth identified the importance of interagency collaboration on the expansion of their resources and social capital (Malloy, Cheney & Cormier, 1998). One of the most rigorous evaluations of the intervention focused on a cohort of 20 youth that received RENEW as the tertiary level intervention in two schools that were implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The results showed significant improvement in youth functioning measured by pre-to-post changes in eight domains using the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (Hodges, Xue & Wotring, 2004). In particular, the youth showed significant improvement in school, home, community, and in the self-harm domains. Interviews with the same cohort of 20 youth also showed greater levels of satisfaction with progress toward goals and future prospects (Malloy et al., 2010). Another project included case studies and interviews with youth and participating school personnel showing positive effects for juvenile-justice-placed participants as they reentered their home communities (Hagner et al., 2008).

Finally, a two-year ethnographic study of four youth using discourse analysis explored how youth perceived their future prospects as they reflected on the RENEW process (Malloy, 2011). This study found that each youth understood his or her environmental and relationship barriers, had cogent and thoughtful arguments about particular courses of action, and developed a sense of power and self-efficacy due in part to the value each placed on the support he or she received from the facilitator and other people who helped him or her. As a result of these studies, RENEW has been identified as a promising practice for transition-age youth with serious emotional disturbance (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Illinois PBIS Network, 2011; Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2010; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2010) and is consistently included among the most innovative and comprehensive approaches to transition for youth with behavioral difficulties (Davis & Sondheim, 2005; Haber et al., 2008).

### **RENEW Replication and Generalizability**

Since the first demonstration in 1996, the RENEW model has shown the flexibility to be implemented in multiple settings and

contexts, including community-based organizations, schools, and by publicly funded community mental health providers. In New Hampshire, RENEW has been implemented by a community-based nonprofit organization funded by small grants, contracts, and fee for service from the state vocational rehabilitation agency. The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire has continued to implement RENEW since the first project with federally and state-funded grants and contracts, including in 13 high schools in New Hampshire as the tertiary level intervention within the three-tiered PBIS framework (Malloy & Hawkins, 2010). These projects have allowed the participating high schools to organize their evidence-based interventions such as Check In/Check Out (Todd et al., 2008) and to use RENEW as the process that allows students with significant behavioral support needs to design and pursue their graduation and transition plans. In these projects, the Institute staff trained special educators, general educators, counseling, and paraprofessional staff as RENEW facilitators. RENEW was also implemented with adjudicated youth with disabilities as they prepared to be, and were discharged from, detention/restrictive placements back to their home communities (Hagner et al., 2008).

Since 2009, RENEW has also been implemented by staff members who serve children and adolescents in six community mental health centers in New Hampshire through a foundation-funded project. The youth in this project are Medicaid-eligible, and the providers in the mental health centers are able to bill Medicaid for all of the elements of the RENEW process under the community-based services option. In the first three years of implementation, the six mental health centers have provided RENEW to 106 youth in New Hampshire. RENEW is also being provided by school staff members in Illinois through the state's PBIS network, and in North Carolina through two of that state's System of Care projects.

### **Manny: A Case Example**

Manny (a pseudonym) was almost 16 years old when he first began meeting with a RENEW facilitator in his high school and Institute on Disability staff in November 2008. His high school had been implementing PBIS and RENEW for two years. Manny was a relatively short and stocky young man of mixed race who was living in a group home for boys. We learned that

his mother was from Puerto Rico and his father was African American. Ms. West, a paraprofessional who worked primarily with students with emotional or behavioral support needs, had convinced Manny to try the RENEW process. During our first meeting, he sat down, gripped the chair rests, and did not look at us. He wore chains on his neck, a fancy New York Yankees ball cap, and had cuts on his hands (a sign of gang membership). As Ms. West gingerly asked him about his history during our first meeting, Manny told a horrific tale in a monotone voice about his childhood in a poor neighborhood in a northern Massachusetts city. Manny described how his only sibling, an older brother, was stabbed to death in a gang-related fight and how after that he began to steal cars, break into homes, and use drugs. He described conflicts with his biological father: "Me and him got into a fistfight last Thanksgiving, he called me an ungrateful kid, told me I shouldn't have been born." Manny left his father's home when he was 12 to live with his biological mother and stepfather in New Hampshire, but he continued to break the law and get into trouble in school. Finally, Manny was incarcerated in the Sununu Center (New Hampshire's juvenile detention center) for nine months when he was 13 years old. Once discharged from the Sununu Center at age 14, he went back to live with his mother and stepfather. Within three months at home, he violated his probation and was sent to a group home where he had remained for almost two years. When the facilitator asked about his family, it was clear that Manny did not know much about them, and he did not offer any information about his parents. He said he never saw his other half-siblings or his natural father.

Manny was struggling in school when we first began to meet. He had accumulated 1.5 credits during his first year in high school, and, although he had fewer behavior problems than in the past, he was accomplishing little in school. Manny had received special education services when he was younger but he was found ineligible through subsequent retesting, and the school staff quickly ruled out the suggestion that he be evaluated for a learning disability again.

The RENEW meetings took place in the school's conference room, and Manny was allowed to miss his guided-study class to meet with us. The sessions began with a discussion of his history and continued with his description of his life today, his preferences and accomplishments, and

what worked and what didn't work for him. During these sessions, Manny became animated and excited to tell us about his interests in rap music, dancing, hip-hop, and reading. Manny was also specific and direct about his dislikes, including when he felt disrespected, or when teachers had low expectations of him (Figure 3 shows Manny's preferences "Map").

Manny's meetings progressed, with the facilitator taking the lead. Soon, she invited a staff member from Manny's group home to the meetings. The group-home manager became a key member of the team by making sure that Manny completed his homework and by communicating with his teachers. The team worked on issues that Manny was facing immediately—failing all of his classes and not cooperating with teachers—while talking with him about longer range planning. Manny was always cooperative and gracious, but it was as though he was tolerating the team process; he rarely took the initiative. Manny had learned good manners somewhere along his troubled path, saying "thank you" to us at several

points. This level of formality surprised us, given his history and experiences.

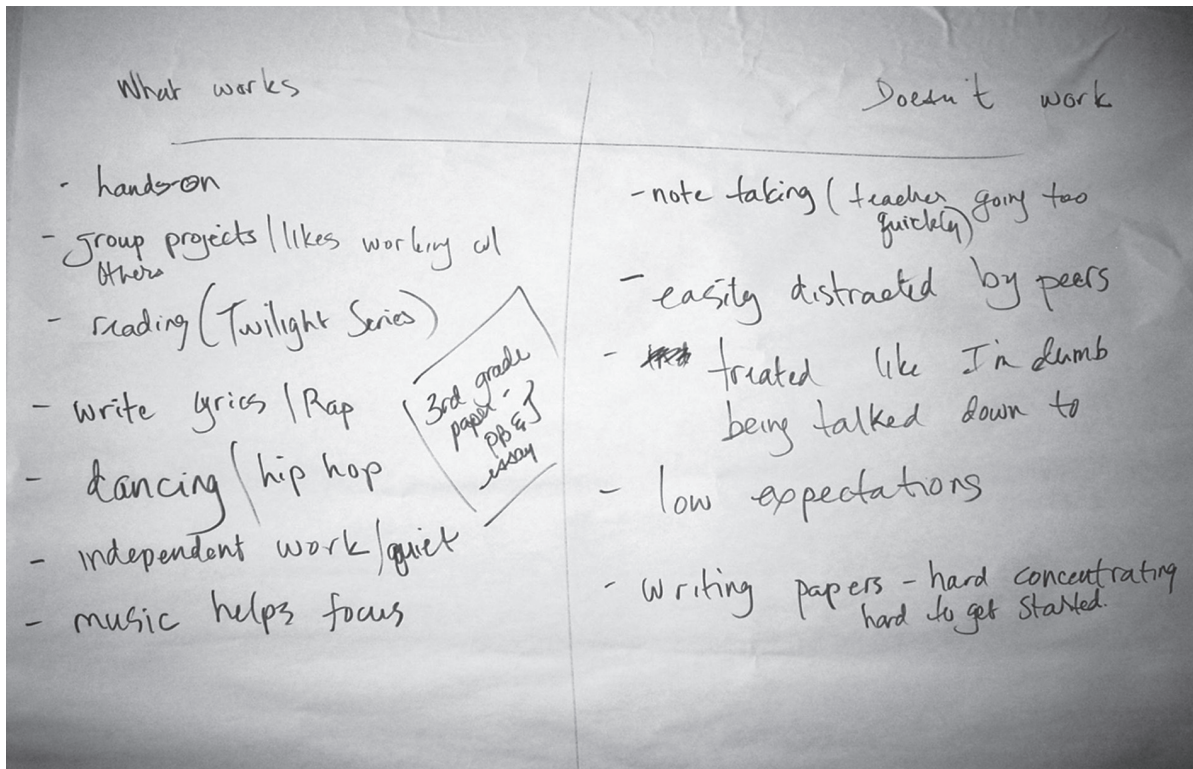
In January 2009, Manny was asked about his dreams and interests. This question stymied him at first, but with prompting from Ms. West, he indicated that he would like to be a barber. This revelation sparked a flurry of discussion as team members probed deeper and found that he liked a particular barber shop near his group home; a place that was "hip and funky." As a result of this conversation, Ms. West used her social capital and asked a friend who got his hair cut at that particular barber shop to approach the owner about a job or an internship for Manny. In April 2009, Manny started working one day a week at the barbershop, a job of which he was clearly proud. Additionally, with the help of his team, Manny passed English and Math at the half-year mark, and he earned 5.5 credits that year. His response about his accomplishments reflected his pride: "I feel better, I don't know why. . . . I go to school, I pass in my work, I feel better."

In the fall of 2009, Manny approached his 17th birthday. If he was compliant with

his probation, he would be free from his placement in the group home on that date. His teachers, principal, and guardian wanted Manny to stay in the group home and in his current school rather than move home with his parents. It became clear, though, that Manny wanted to go home, where he would be free from the rules and confinement of the group home and could connect with friends at his old school. In October 2009, the judge released Manny to go home. This was a month before his 17th birthday, so his team had not been able to prepare fully for his transition back home.

The university staff accompanied Manny to his admission meeting at the new high school in his home town. His new school was four times the size of his previous school, and there were no PBIS or RENEW supports in place. After two months of conflicts and problem behaviors, Manny was suspended in January for the remainder of the school year for fighting and for suspicion of being a member of a gang. His team thought he was lost to "the system." However, in September of 2010, the principal of the school where he had been so successful

**Figure 3: Manny's Preferences "MAP"**



called me to say: “Guess who came in to see me today? Manny. He is working and going to night school. He looks good. He said he misses us.”

One can only hope that the RENEW meetings with Manny provided seeds of self-respect and gave him hope. Although Manny’s responses and behavior in our meetings were often without emotion, he was polite, expressed his gratitude, joked occasionally, and engaged socially with the adults on his team in a charming and appropriate manner. The manager of his group home told us that Manny said he liked the meetings because people on the RENEW team, “don’t nag me.”

The person-centered planning process allowed Manny to share his interests and strengths with teachers and counselors in the school for the first time. As he was surrounded by people who were willing to help him, and as he engaged in the RENEW process, Manny began to revise his self-view and developed positive reciprocal relationships, which contributed to a transformed vision of his future prospects. Over time, Manny began to trust his team members to assist him in academic activities that he had, to date, found to be difficult and a waste of his time. He attended all but one RENEW meeting faithfully and was engaged in the problem-solving process. Manny valued accomplishment and self-reliance, felt unconditionally supported, and knew that he was reinforced in his efforts to complete his work and do well. Manny learned that he could work toward his goal to become a barber—a dream he revised as he gained more experience.

As we see, however, the process is not perfect. Manny was discharged from probation before his team had the chance to plan for his transition, and his supports were dropped when he went to a different school that did not have RENEW. It is important to note, however, that the high school where RENEW was provided to him was willing to keep him enrolled there and was willing to transport him to and from his parents’ home (20 miles away). In the end, Manny went home and was summarily suspended for six months. Manny had apparently learned how to find his own alternatives, however, and was proud to let the principal at the high school where he had been successful know that he was doing well.

### Why RENEW Works

The RENEW process has several elements that distinguish it from typical

supports and services offered to struggling youth. The futures planning process is entirely focused on the youth and his or her narrative, as opposed to the needs or norms of the school or agency. The futures planning process requires the facilitator to capture the youth’s narrative and makes it public by documenting it on flip chart paper that everyone can see. This is different from the process of the youth talking to a case manager or counselor across a desk where the counselor documents the conversation in a confidential folder

This RENEW planning process also differs from the way that individualized education plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities are developed. An IEP can be developed without the student’s direct input and often focuses on what the school will provide and less on natural and other supports. The RENEW plan, however, is an organic and living document developed entirely upon the youth’s self-assessment and needs, and natural supports and team

The youth also begins to experience the powerful benefits that can be derived from a strong network of supports developed through positive reciprocal relationships. Although many youth come to this process feeling socially isolated and uncared for, the team development and implementation process allows the youth to learn that he or she needs the help of other people to succeed, and that others can be trusted to follow through. Youth who have experienced RENEW have said: “I didn’t know anyone cared about me” until they experienced this process. Once the youth begins to experience success from the support and caring of others, many have told us: “I started caring about myself.”

The third phase of the process, implementation and monitoring of the plan, allows the youth to understand and experience success using problem-solving strategies. Instead of avoiding difficult or overwhelming challenges or letting others make the decisions, the youth is given the

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***The futures planning process is entirely focused on the youth and his or her narrative, as opposed to the needs or norms of the school or agency.***

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member resources are key components of the helping network.

The development of teams is also quite different from traditional school or agency procedures. For example, students with IEPs must have a standing team and family involvement. In contrast, the RENEW process involves bringing key individuals to the table for the express purpose of helping the youth achieve his or her stated goals. The meetings need not be formal, and many team members may attend only one or two meetings. Individuals are asked to be part of the youth’s team for very specific reasons. For example, when Manny said he wanted to be a barber and that he liked a particular local barber shop, it allowed his facilitator to know exactly what to do and where she could go to ask for a job for Manny. Instead of a “shotgun” approach to developing resources and support, the futures planning process provides team members with a target for their efforts. This leads to greater efficiency of effort and a greater likelihood that help that is given to each student will have a positive impact because the youth has designed the plan.

opportunity and support to assess failures and challenges using a rational, data-driven process. The youth also learns how to negotiate and work with all kinds of people, including people the student may not like. Instead of avoiding problems and repeatedly using failed strategies, the problem-solving and progress-monitoring processes allow the youth to learn critical life skills associated with planning, problem solving, and negotiating. These skills are taught in a context that is important and of significant relevance to the youth.

The RENEW facilitator has skills and employs techniques that are different from those of providers of typical services to youth with emotional and behavioral challenges. The facilitator intentionally develops supportive and valuable relationships for each youth. This is not the responsibility or part of an intervention that is typically provided by school personnel, especially the development of relationships outside of the school’s purview. In addition, instead of doing everything for the youth, the facilitator works to engage and support individuals who will become part of the student’s



network of socially based resources. This represents a major paradigm shift for most interventionists who work with youth with emotional and behavioral challenges.

Finally, the “work until it works” philosophy challenges our systems in the education and mental health communities. The notion of unconditional care—that the team continues to work with the youth through all challenges and failures—is difficult for our systems to manage. For this reason, the school and agency administrators need to understand that their staff members who are trained RENEW facilitators will continue to meet and offer support to the youth even when the outcomes are not being achieved. This does not mean that the youth will not be held responsible for poor behavior. It

many school districts may find that they are spending a high percentage of their dollars on a small percentage of students and getting questionable school-to-adult-life transition outcomes in the process.

From the research perspective, more rigorous studies of the RENEW model and its elements are needed. Specifically, studies of RENEW using a randomized controlled design will establish whether or not it is effective in producing positive outcomes. There is also a need for more rigorous research on the effects of the elements of the model, such as the impact of personal futures planning versus typical transition planning, and the youth-driven versus agency-driven processes. We also need to understand if personal futures planning, focused on and

Youth with significant life challenges can learn how to trust and engage with others, feel like a part of a community, develop self-efficacy, and become competent as they transition into adult life. By having a stake in our society’s mainstream activities, and by believing they can contribute to and gain from everyday activities such as schooling, working, and developing a set of positive relationships, most youth who would otherwise drop out of school can instead become college and career ready and be on a trajectory that leads to their full potential and to their full inclusion in our society and communities. It is important for educators and members of the behavioral health community at all levels of influence to advocate for positive, strengths-based approaches to ensure that all of our children and youth receive the supports that they need to be successful in school and in their communities.

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***Youth with significant life challenges can learn how to trust and engage with others, feel like a part of a community, develop self-efficacy, and become competent as they transition into adult life.***

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does mean, however, that the youth will not be denied support or facilitation because of his or her behavior. The process of using a structured, person-centered and student-driven planning strategy is what makes the RENEW and similar models unique, and most youth respond to this process in a positive way.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Our school structures and community behavioral health systems can make the necessary adjustments in order to support the RENEW process. School counselors, special educators, and general education teachers, working with the support of their administrators, have provided person-centered planning services and engaged family members and community stakeholders in the structured-manner RENEW process, with an emphasis on supporting youth with the most significant emotional and behavioral challenges. This involves diverting resources that go to high-cost out-of-school placements back into the school in order to use those dollars to create positions for RENEW facilitators, or for purchasing the facilitation service from community-based providers. Through a systematic analysis of expenditures that go to high-need students with emotional and behavioral challenges,

designed by the youth, results in greater motivation and better outcomes than traditional planning models.

### **Conclusion**

Youth who are affected negatively by zero tolerance policies have emotional and behavioral challenges that extend far beyond school. These youth need support to gain more control over their current situation, to identify their assets and strengths and build on them, to correctly identify their problems and develop realistic solutions, and to look toward and plan for their future when they seek to establish their own homes and families. By using personal futures planning and by building a network of natural and community-based resources with each youth, the RENEW process allows these youth to create a positive vision that builds trust in others. Through this process of self-discovery and self-determination, the youth begins to build self-efficacy and begins to believe that it is possible to become a barber, an electrician, a firefighter, a teacher, a nurse, go to college, buy a car, have a dog, and have fulfilling adult relationships. The challenge for teachers and community providers is to take the leap of faith and facilitate these structured conversations with youth and to support youth unconditionally through that process.

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