



More than 1,000 people crowded the 26<sup>th</sup> annual Virginia Transition Forum in Norfolk this week to share successes and lessons learned in helping youth with disabilities as they prepare to transition from school to work or postsecondary education and greater independence.

The theme, “Taking Steps to Person-Centered Thinking,” emphasized the importance of focusing on an individual’s interests, strengths and abilities, and using that information to create a specific plan of action to achieve the individual’s goals. A total of 1,022 people registered for the Forum to hear its message of “Ask ... Listen ... Respect ... Commit.”

At the opening ceremony Monday, DRS Commissioner Jim Rothrock, Department for the Blind and Vision Commissioner Raymond Hopkins and Patricia Wright, Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Virginia Department of Education, provided a joint welcome to the Forum attendees.

In her keynote address, Commissioner Lynnae Ruttledge of the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration spoke of the country’s need for the talents and skills of youth with disabilities, noting that they “come at life with creative solutions every day.” Students with disabilities must play a role in the United States’ future as it strives to maintain excellence in education and technology, she said. Prior to the opening ceremony, Commissioner Ruttledge met with the State Rehabilitation Council and visited with parents and youth attendees to hear about their transition experiences.



Commissioner Ruttledge received a print of Virginia artist P. Buckley Moss’ “Abilities” in appreciation of her time and words of encouragement to the Forum attendees.

Commissioner Rothrock presented the annual **Commissioner’s Excellence in Transition Award** to the Thomas Nelson Community College/Williamsburg-James City Supported Education Pilot. The collaborative model uses education coaches to provide individualized supports to students with significant disabilities to enhance their skills for employment.

Through funding provided by the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University’s Rehabilitation and Research Training Center (VCU-RRTC) worked with a team to pilot the model. Members of the team include Thomas Nelson Community College, Department of Rehabilitative Services, Williamsburg/James City public schools, students and family members, the ARC of Greater Williamsburg and education coaches.

“It is so exciting to see the collaborative spirit of these award winners that results as our youth with disabilities realize their dream of becoming successfully employed and on a solid career track,” said Rothrock. He presented the award to Beverly Walker-Griffea, vice president for student affairs at Thomas Nelson Community College, who accepted on behalf of the team.



**PILOT TEAM PARTICIPANTS:**  
**Richard Hurst**, Counselor/Coordinator  
ADA, Thomas Nelson Community  
College  
**Michelle Green**, Transition  
Coordinator, Williamsburg/James City  
Public Schools  
**Courtney Frantz**, Special Education  
Teacher, Williamsburg/James City  
Public Schools  
**Matt Luther**, Counselor, Department  
of Rehabilitative Services  
**Pamela McGregor**, Executive Director,  
The ARC of Greater Williamsburg  
**Elizabeth Getzel**, Director, PSE  
Initiatives, VCU-RRTC  
**Lori Briel**, Associate Director, PSE  
Initiatives, VCU-RRTC

Two DRS employees were honored at the Forum's luncheon Tuesday with the **Bill Hinek award**. This award recognizes a person who is retiring and who has devoted most of his/her career to the field of secondary transition and to the success of youth in transition.



**Beth Somers**, who served as co-chair for the 2011 Forum, has worked for DRS for the past 25 years. She previously worked as a transition teacher in a state operated program before coming to DRS and has since served as a transition resource specialist with the PERT Program at the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center and as a transition coordinator. Somers has successfully collaborated with agency partners to organize functions including the annual Transition Forum, the Summer Institute, Transition Practitioner's Council, Virginia Intercommunity Transition Council, local Transition Council meetings and numerous other events.



**John Phelps**, Special Assistant to Commissioner Rothrock, has served multiple positions in DRS, including counselor, manager, regional director and DRS Field Rehabilitative Services director. As FRS director, he spearheaded the slogan "Roadmap to Success" to guide the approach staff should to in serving DRS clients. In 2009, the Transition Forum's planning committee adopted this slogan as its theme. In recent years, Phelps (pictured here with Transition Forum co-chair Kathe Wittig of VCU-RRTC) has devoted much of his attention to transition services and serves as one of the Transition Forum's advisors.