
POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

By Edward M. Levinson, PhD, NCSP, Matthew R. Ferchalk, & Tara Lynn Seifert
Indiana University of Pennsylvania



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Leaving home for the first time. Starting a new job. Getting married. Having a baby. All of us have experienced change at one time or another. It is something we anticipate and fear. Consider students with disabilities. As they approach the end of their school career they are left with the same doubts and fears about change that we all have. For these students leaving school, a transition plan can and should be created to help them manage this change. This plan should address their strengths as well as their needs. It should address their short-term as well as their long-term goals. A formalized transition plan is a promise to these students that we have done all we can to prepare them for life after school. It is an assurance that they will leave school with the knowledge and skills they will need to make their way in the world.

Importance of Transition Services

Research demonstrates that students with disabilities drop out of school more frequently than do students without disabilities. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in their Annual Report to Congress in 2001 reported that up to 50% of students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders drop out of school. Recent U.S. Department of Education reports indicate rates are improving but are still as high as 29%.

These students upon leaving school often lack the training and skills necessary to obtain employment. As a result, they experience higher rates of unemployment, lower pay, and greater job dissatisfaction than do high school graduates. A student's decision to drop out of school often leads to increased societal and economic costs such as decreased economic productivity and heightened crime rates. Students with disabilities who leave school are almost three times more likely to be arrested than students with disabilities who graduate from high school. These numbers are even higher if the student is diagnosed with having a serious emotional disturbance. Communities are also burdened with the costs of increased social services they must provide for dropouts who lack independence.

The Law

Transition is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as:

A coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. The coordinated set of activities shall take into account the student's preferences and interests, and shall include instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (emphasis added; Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990, Public Law 101-476, section 602 (a)).

Key Issues

Coordinated set of activities. There should be linkages established between schools and community agencies relative to service delivery roles and responsibilities. Activities that should be listed in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) include instruction, community experiences, development of employment and post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, daily living skills and functional evaluation. What services different agencies will provide should be clearly articulated in interagency agreements.

Post-school activities. Post-school activities that may be considered include post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation. Therefore, transition planning is meant to address more than employment; it should address needs within the broader focus of life in the community.

Timeline

While the law requires that formalized transition planning must begin at the age of 14, theoretically it should begin as early as possible. It is never too soon for parents and teachers to take steps that foster a student's eventual independence and ability to make the transition to adult life. Interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills, for example, are necessary for a student to make a successful transition from school to post-school life and can begin to be taught as soon as students enter school, if not earlier.

IEP Components

Transition is a life-long process, so IEPs should address both long-term and short-term goals. As appropriate, goals and needs should be identified in the areas of employment, post-secondary education, vocational training, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation. Curriculum and instruction should parallel the student's needs and personal goals. There should be an attempt to integrate both vocational and academic curricula. Instruction should take place in appropriate settings (which often may be outside of school and in the community).

Who Plans Transition

The student, the student's special and regular education teacher(s), a representative of the school, the parents, and representatives from outside community/adult service agencies must be involved in the transition-planning process. Though the school is primarily responsible for providing transition services, the law clearly suggests that community agencies need to be involved in the process as well. Others who might provide helpful input include the school psychologist, social worker, counselor, and those involved in the student's current or potential work settings (job coaches, vocational coordinator).

Effective Transition Planning

Certain factors can facilitate positive secondary/post-secondary outcomes for students.

Vocational experiences. Both participation in

vocational education and paid work experiences while in high school can help ease the transition process. Students need to have the chance to learn skills in real settings, as well as become familiar with the responsibilities and advantages of paid work. Students during the last 2 years of high school should be afforded opportunities for community participation and part-time work experiences. This may include work in a shelter, participation in a church group, or work in public places such as a library or community building. This will also help students to develop links to resources that they may later need and access.

Support services. The IEP team should foster connections with instructional support services (e.g., aides and resources). Support services directed toward helping a student through transition should be comprehensive, so mental health counseling as well as career counseling may be needed. Services for the student should be appropriate and address individual needs.

Comprehensive assessment. A comprehensive vocational/transition assessment should be completed to determine what services are appropriate and necessary for an individual student. Such an assessment should evaluate a student's cognitive and academic skills, interests and aptitudes, and personality. The assessment should also assess functional academics, community living skills, personal-social skills, vocational skills, and self-advocacy skills.

Student Participation

Transition planning is concerned with the student's future, so the student should be given as many opportunities as possible to take part in the transition-planning process. Here are some issues that educators should encourage students to do to help themselves:

- *Think about their future:* Students should be prepared to answer the following questions: What do they want to do when they leave school? What are their interests and hobbies? What don't they like?
- *Take part in transition planning:* When students become active participants in the planning process, the transition plan becomes more meaningful and thus increasing the likelihood of its success. Students should attend all transition-planning meetings.
- *Ask questions:* Planning for the future can be confusing. Encourage students to ask questions if they don't understand what is being discussed.
- *Let the team know what they want:* The student's goals and wishes should be included in the

transition plans. The success of a transition plan depends on the cooperation and initiative of the student.

- *Find a part-time job:* Students should learn work-related skills in practical real-life settings. Part-time work experiences help foster a sense of accomplishment and independence.
- *Volunteer within the community:* Volunteering is a great way to gain experience in a variety of settings while creating valuable links in the community.

Parent Involvement

Parents know their children better than any other team member. Here are some ideas parents can use:

- *Start teaching transition skills early:* Transition planning should begin very early in life. For example, children can be taught to appreciate the value of work as well as occupational options as early as elementary school. Children can develop functional skills by accompanying their parents to the grocery store, the laundromat, and by ordering and paying for their own meals in a restaurant.
- *Take an active part in the planning process:* Parents should participate in the development of the IEP. This should also include developing objectives in employment, residential living, and community functioning.
- *Share information with other team members:* Parents should provide the team with information about their child's interests, skills, work/study habits, activities, and goals. This may be done informally through interviews or formally through the completion of questionnaires and rating scales.
- *Provide their child with opportunities to become self-sufficient:* Parents can teach their child to develop a sense of self-advocacy, self-determination, and independence. They should provide their children with experiences that allow for the understanding of employment, residential living, and post-secondary educational options as well as improving their child's ability to make decisions.

School Staff Support

What follows is a sample of the type of information that school personnel might supply and the role they can assume:

- *Provide information:* Teachers can provide information about a student's special learning needs and instructional techniques that have proven to be effective in accommodating those needs.

- *Conduct comprehensive assessments:* Teachers and support personnel can conduct the comprehensive assessment as noted above, including conducting student and parent interviews, administering standardized tests, conducting teacher-made tests that assess academic skills, and by supplying samples of the student's work.
- *Promote independence:* Teachers can develop classroom activities that promote self-awareness, decision making, and occupational awareness through the use of role-playing, dramatizations, skits, field trips, guest speakers, and work simulations.
- *Integrate vocational and academic instruction:* Teachers can integrate the instruction of vocationally relevant academic skills, occupational and vocational skills, social/interpersonal skills, and independent living skills into their regular classroom instruction. Teachers can work with vocational specialists and job coaches to help the student make the connection between what the student is learning and the broad range of career alternatives and job responsibilities.
- *Get parents involved:* The parents' knowledge is critical to effective transition planning. Teachers should recognize the parents' strengths and successes and reinforce them.
- *Clearly communicate the importance of transition planning to parents:* Teachers can provide information to parents in non-technical language and in a manner that that can easily be understood.
- *Work to build a collaborative relationship with parents:* Educators and parents need to realize they are working toward a common goal of developing a plan that best meets the child's post-school needs. Establishing a strong working relationship between parents, teachers, and other members of the team is paramount to the success of the transition plan.
- *Attend workshops:* Teachers need to become an efficient and effective team member by attending workshops on transition planning and by doing reading to improve knowledge of the process.

Resources

- Hanley-Maxwell, C. (1999). Transition from school-to-adult life. In D. Reschly, W. Tilly III, & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Special education in transition: Functional assessment and noncategorical programming* (pp. 139–168). Longmont, CO: Sopris West. ISBN: 1-57035-227-5.
- Levinson, E. M. (1998). *Transition: Facilitating the post-school adjustment of students with disabilities*. Boulder, CO: Westview. ASIN: 0813325153.

Witte, R. (2002). Best practices in transition to post-secondary work. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 1585–1598). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0-932955-85-1.

Websites

IDEA Practices—www.ideapractices.org

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition—www.ncset.org

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)—www.pacer.org

Western Regional Resource Center—
<http://interact.uoregon.edu/WRRRC/trnfiles/trncontents.htm>

Edward M. Levinson, PhD, NCSP, is a Professor of Educational and School Psychology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA. Matthew R. Ferchalk and Tara Lynn Seifert are school psychology students and graduate assistants at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.



The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit