Transition planning

For middle school and high school students and their parents, this article provides important information about the transition services that must be a part ofIEPs for all students with disabilities who are age 16 or older.

Why is this important?**Transition planning** is crucial to students' success after high school. Because students with disabilities often experience limited success after leaving high school, many new IDEA 2004 provisions seek to improve transition planning so that students with disabilities can be more successful in their adult lives.

What can parents do? All too often, parents fail to take an active role in their child's transition planning. Parents can take an active role by working with the school to plan the supports and services that will lead to success.

Parents can also help their children to define goals and aspirations for life after high school. Both parents and students need to make sure that transition planning starts early enough for adequate preparation, which is frequently well before IDEA's mandatory age of 16.

Words and Terms to Know

Functional skills: As used in this chapter, functional skills are those needed for independent living, such as cooking, shopping, working with or managing money, using public transportation, and knowing how to be safe at home and in the community

Postsecondary education: Formal education or training beyond high school, including college, university, vocational school and trade school.

Courses of study: Middle and high school course work (or classes) that lead to certain types of diplomas and/or are required for postsecondary education.

Transition services: A coordinated set of activities that:

* Improves the academic and functional skills of the student in order to facilitate the student's movement from school to post-school activities such as postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living or community participation
* Is based on the individual student's needs, taking into account his or her strengths, preferences and interests
* Includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives and, when appropriate, the acquisition of daily living skills. Transition services often include a functional vocational evaluation.

Summary of performance: A summary of the student's academic achievement and functional performance that includes recommendations to assist the student in meeting his or her postsecondary goals (more details later in this chapter).

Vocational Rehabilitation Agency: A publicly funded state agency that provides direct and indirect services to youth with disabilities as they transition from school to work, in order to maximize their employability, independence and integration into the workplace and the community..

Vocational rehabilitation (VR): a set of services offered to individuals with disabilities designed to enable participants to attain skills, resources, attitudes, and expectations needed to

compete in the interview process, get a job, and keep a job.

Transition services must be included in the first IEP that will be in effect when a student turns 16. So, this generally means that you should begin to include transition services in the IEP that is prepared when your child is 15. However, IDEA 2004 also makes it clear that IEP teams are free to begin planning at an earlier age if the team considers it appropriate to do so. Many students with learning disabilities need to start their transition planning in middle school because they may need to take specific classes or courses of study to keep them on a path to achieve their postsecondary goals. As full and equal partners in the IEP team, you should advocate for transition planning for your child at an early age and ensure that services in the IEP directly support postsecondary goals. Check to see when your state policies recommend starting transition planning.

Expanding the IEP Team

Under IDEA 2004, schools continue to be responsible for bringing in representatives from other agencies, such as vocational rehabilitation agency or postsecondary education, to be part of the planning for transition services with the consent of the parents or the student who has reached the age of majority. Your IEP meeting notice must indicate the individuals from other agencies who have been invited to attend your child's IEP meeting. If you feel that the school is not including appropriate representatives to help with transition planning, be sure to let the school know.

Beyond simply participating in your child’s IEP, these agencies may also be responsible for the delivery of some of the needed transition services. To ensure that transition services are provided, IDEA 2004 makes it clear that if these agencies do not provide the services for which they are responsible, the school must find alternative ways to meet the transition objectives for your child.

In addition to other agency representatives, IDEA requires that your child be included in the IEP meeting when planning for transition services begins. If your child can not or does not attend the meeting, IDEA requires that the school district take other steps to ensure that his or her preferences and interests are considered in the planning of transition services.

Don't forget that your child can be part of the IEP team long before transition planning begins. You and the school should work together to determine the best time to begin including your child as part of the team.

Parent Perspective: Setting Goals and Planning for the Transition to College

Monica from New York describes the importance of early and active transition planning.. Click the play button at right to listen or read the transcript.

Requirements for Transition Planning

The IEP team must develop appropriate, measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills. There are age-appropriate transition assessments such as personal interest inventories that could be given to your child to help identify his or her individual special talents and interests.

In developing your child's transition goals, the IEP team (including your child) must determine what instruction and educational experiences will help prepare him or her for a successful transition to life after high school. Once the goals are developed, the IEP team must then develop a statement of the transition services, including courses of study, needed to assist your child in reaching those goals.

IDEA requires states to provide special education services to eligible students until they either graduate with a regular diploma or exceed the age limit established in IDEA (reaching age 22) or by your state law. Students receiving diplomas other than a regular diploma are entitled to continue to receive services under IDEA until exceeding the age limit. The IEP team decides when it is appropriate for a student to exit special education.

The statement of transition services should relate directly to your child's postsecondary goals, and should:

* Define every activity that must occur
* Identify who has primary responsibility for each activity
* Specify the dates and order that each activity will begin and end
* Motivate your child to complete his or her education and minimize the risk of dropping out prior to graduation.

Use the Transition Considerations Checklist to help plan transition goals and services.

Parent Perspective: Tools for the High School Student with Learning Disabilities
Salle from Colorado describes an innovative self-advocacy program that helped her daughter succeed. Click the play button at right to listen or read the transcript.

Coming of Age

Another important aspect of transition planning is the requirement to notify your child one year before he or she reaches the "age of majority" under state law (18 years of age in most states). At that time, the IEP must include a statement that your child has been informed of his or her rights under IDEA (if any) that will transfer from you to him or her upon reaching that age.

This is an important event in the life of a student. Under state laws, when your child reaches the age of majority, he or she is presumed to be capable of making his or her own decisions – including educational decisions. That does not mean that you cannot continue to be involved in your child's education. It just means that, by law, schools must respect the educational decisions of every adult student, unless that person has been determined to be incapable of making decisions.

The rights that will transfer from you to your child upon reaching the age of majority include:

* Notification of meetings
* Notification and consent for evaluation
* Selection of participants who attend IEP meetings
* Approval of the contents of the IEP.

For those students who may be found legally incompetent and unable to make important life decisions, schools should provide parents with the information necessary to establish their child's legal incompetence and begin guardianship proceedings with local district courts.

How Parents and Schools Can Prepare Students to Understand Their Rights

* Students should understand their disability and be able to advocate for themselves.

* Students should understand why they receive special education services.
* Students should receive written and oral notification of meetings.
* Students should be notified of changes in placement with explanations of why those changes occurred. This notification should be in the communication mode best suited for each individual student.

* Students should participate and assist in the IEP meetings.
* Students should receive explanations of the type and purpose of all evaluations.
* Students should be involved in the interpretation of test results.
* Students should be given the opportunity to review their educational records.
* Students should know their rights under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act.
* Students should participate in self-advocacy and self-determination training.

The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition offers more information about this important topic in Age of Majority: Preparing Your Child for Making Good Choices.

Moving On

IDEA 2004 made an important change to the requirement for reevaluations when terminating special education services. Reevaluations were generally required in order to determine that special education and related services are no longer needed. Now, under IDEA 2004, when a student graduates with a regular diploma or reaches the maximum age for receiving special education services as set by the state (turning 22 years of age in most cases), the school district is not required to perform a reevaluation. Instead, the school district must now provide a summary of the student's academic and functional performance. This summary of performance must include recommendations for helping the student meet his or her goals after high school.

The summary of performance is a description of your child's academic achievement and functional performance that includes recommendations to assist him or her in meeting postsecondary goals. The summary may include the information and documentation of your child's abilities and disabilities that will be necessary to access supports and services in post-school activities, such as higher education. It should provide specific, meaningful and understandable information to your child, your family, and any agency, including postsecondary schools, that may provide services to your child after high school.

Your child will want to check with the Disability Services Office at postsecondary schools and with community services agencies to identify any specific information or documentation needed to qualify for support services.

While schools are not required to conduct any new tests or evaluations in order to provide the summary of performance, you and your child should work with the school so that the information provided will be adequate to satisfy the disability documentation required to qualify him or her as a person with a disability under other federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

The IEP team should discuss what needs to be included in your child's summary of performance prior to termination of special education services. You should bring up this topic if it has not already been addressed by the IEP team. It is important to ensure that the information provided in the summary will satisfy any requirements connected with your child's post-school goals. You and your child should specifically request any needed information that is not provided.