Transition Planning for Students with IEPs:
Learn how this part of the IEP allows a teen in special education to outline goals that will help him achieve his post-high school plans.

By Kristin Stanberry

The transition from high school to young adulthood is a critical stage for all teenagers; for students with [disabilities] this stage requires extra planning and goal setting. Factors to consider include post-secondary education, the development of career and vocational skills, as well as the ability to live independently.

The first step in planning for a successful transition is developing the student's transition plan. A transition plan is required for students enrolled in special education who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). In this article, we will define and describe transition planning and how it can be utilized to maximize your teenager's future success.

What is a Transition Plan? A transition plan is the section of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) that outlines transition goals and services for the student. The transition plan is based on a high school student's individual needs, strengths, skills, and interests. Transition planning is used to identify and develop goals which need to be accomplished during the current school year to assist the student in meeting his post-high school goals.

When Should Transition Planning Begin? The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 04) requires that in the first IEP that will be in effect when the student turns 16 years of age, his annual IEP must include a discussion about transition service needs (some states may mandate that the process start even earlier). A statement of those needs, based upon his transition assessment and future goals, must then be written into his IEP. IDEA 04 mandates that the annual IEP meeting focus on more specific planning and goal setting for the necessary transition services. Factors to be included are: academic preparation, community experience, development of vocational and independent living objectives, and, if applicable, a functional vocational evaluation. The agreed upon plans must then be documented in the student's IEP. The law also requires that a statement of the student's transition goals and services be included in the transition plan. Schools must report to parents on the student's progress toward meeting his transition goals. The IEP team may begin discussing transition services with the student before he turns 16, if they see fit. If the IEP team hasn't begun to focus on transition planning by the time your child turns 16, it is important for you, as the parent, to initiate that process.

Why is Transition Planning Important? It isn't enough to simply be aware that teenagers need guidance to transition successfully from high school to the next phase of young adulthood; concrete action steps must be taken to guide and prepare teens for college and/or a career, and for independent living. Without this guidance, students with disabilities often fail or flounder in high school and beyond. Transition services, provided by knowledgeable educators and community resources, can be tailored to a student's goals and strengths and provide him with options and plans for his future. Transition services offer students with [disabilities] hope for the future.

What Transition Services Are Available for a High School Student with [a disability] and an IEP? At the high school level, transition services for students who have [a disability] and an IEP are available through their special education programs and general education programs. Special education staff provides assistance with counseling, identifying vocational interests, educational and vocational planning, goal setting, pre-vocational skills training, academic support, and linkages to specific programs and services. Other transition-related services that are available to all high school students include guidance counseling, career center services, work experience education,
academy programs, and career education vocational courses. Check with your child's special education teacher and/or your school district's office of student personnel services to see which specific programs are offered.

Who Should Participate in IEP Meetings where Transition Planning is Discussed?
All transition planning meetings should include the student, family members, teachers, and other school staff. According to IDEA, anyone else involved in the student's transition plan must also be invited. This might include representatives from school-to-work transition programs, local social service agencies, counseling programs, medical care providers, and advocates.

Parents are key players in the transition planning process. You know your child better than anyone else and can share plans and ideas you and your child have discussed concerning his future. You can help by contributing information about your child's life and experiences outside of school. It's important to include your teenager in these discussions and encourage him to advocate for his own needs and wishes.

What is the Role of a High School Student in Transition Planning? A student needs to begin thinking about what he wants to do as an adult before his first transition planning meeting takes place. This is his chance to take an active role in planning his education and make school relevant to his future. This is the time for the student to propose dreams and set goals for reaching them. It is an avenue to prove what he can accomplish, to identify things he enjoys and feels competent doing, and to set himself on a path of his choosing.

At the same time, he should be realistic about how he'll need to accommodate for his learning difficulties while pursuing his education and vocation. In general, the transition plan can emphasize a student's abilities rather than his areas of difficulty. Some steps a high school student can take to prepare for the transition planning process include:

- Using his school's career center to identify his interests and find out what education and training are required.
- Completing interest inventories to identify his interests, skills, abilities, and aptitudes as they relate to employment. Doing volunteer work or entry-level jobs in his field(s) of interest.
- Observing and interviewing adults who perform the type of work that interests him.
- Visiting training institutes and colleges to learn about entrance requirements; this will help your teenager choose the necessary classes in high school. For example, students interested in forestry need to take science; engineers need advanced math courses; actors need drama courses, and graphic artists need art as well as computer design classes.

Transition Planning Activities at Home and in the Community Many transition planning activities and objectives are carried out at school. However, unlike traditional IEP objectives, many objectives stated in the transition plan take place outside of school - at home and in the community. These activities may include:

At Home:

- Giving your teen chores and responsibilities will encourage his independence and responsibility. As you do this, think ahead to the skills he'll need as an independent adult. For example: He should open his own checking or savings account(s) and learn how to manage his money.
- When he's learning to drive and studying to pass his driver's license test, he should also learn about automobile insurance and routine vehicle maintenance.
- It's never too early to teach your child self-advocacy skills; these skills will continue to help him move toward independent adulthood.

In the Community:
Look within your own community for opportunities to expose your teenager to future possibilities. Consider: Taking your teenager to work. Networking with friends and relatives about their jobs. Consider having your child take a workplace tour and conduct informational interviews. Researching and visiting local colleges and training schools your teenager is interested in attending.

What Community Resources are Available to Help Students in the Transition Process? Most communities have a variety of resources to assist students with the transition process. For job listings, youth may contact their local youth employment program, summer jobs for youth program, and WorkAbility and/or Transition Partnership programs (TPP) at their school. Local vocational centers offer training in hundreds of occupations. These centers include

- Regional Occupational Program (ROP),
- Job Corps, state Conservation Corps (CCC),
- adult education programs, and
- community colleges.

Final Documentation:

Your Child’s Summary of Performance IDEA 04 requires schools to provide a “Summary of Performance” to a student who will no longer be eligible for special education services because he is graduating from high school with a regular diploma or because he exceeds the age for services in his state. The Summary of Performance must include information on the student’s academic achievement and functional performance; it must also recommend ways to help the student meet his postsecondary goals. The information provided in the summary should be adequate to satisfy the disability documentation required under federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 - which apply to both postsecondary education and adult employment. Be sure you, as the parent, obtain and keep a copy of your child's Summary of Performance. This will ensure the document is not lost should your teenager misplace or discard his copy.

Preparing for Future Success Noted psychologist and author Bob Brooks points out, "It is not unusual to find that some individuals with learning problems first begin to experience success after they leave school, at which time they engage in activities that are more in keeping with their interest and strengths." Developing and utilizing a transition plan in high school can help your teenager [with disability] pave the way to a more successful and fulfilling future.

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