

Transitional Planning in Special Ed

Start Early When Determining and Preparing for Life After School

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Parents and guardians of special-education students often misunderstand the rights that state and federal law affords such students, particularly in the area of transitional planning. Transition services are those designed to prepare children for education beyond high school, employment, and independent living, and must be included in the first individualized education plan (IEP) in effect when a child turns 16 years old (typically developed when the student is 15).

Federal and state laws dictate that school districts provide transition planning to special-education students between the ages of 14 and 22. These services are in furtherance of the free appropriate public education (FAPE) that special-education students are entitled to receive.

The IEP process for a student receiving transitional services is much like that of any special education student; however, it differs in one critical area — once a student reaches the age of 14, he or she must be invited, though is not required, to participate in the IEP process. The key to effective transition planning is starting early and understanding what services your special-education child is entitled to, and which are appropriate given his or her academic achievement and potential post-secondary life skills.

Effective transition planning starts well before the student reaches the age of 14, however, and takes into account individual needs, strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Specific services may include academic instruction, exposure to social experiences, training in adult living skills, or soft skills such as interviewing

or résumé writing. Effective communication between your child (however he or she is able) and you, as the parent or guardian, is always the first step in successful transition planning. Although most students — special education or otherwise — don't know what they want to do after leaving high school, these discussions should take place early and often during the child's high-school career.

personality, career preference tests, and vocational-skills evaluations. Informal assessments are the subjective observation of your child both in and out of the classroom setting, and may include viewing him or her in their workplace or interviews.

Transition planning is not an abstract idea. In fact, your child's IEP should clearly identify his or her post-secondary goals, as well as the services being provided by the school district in furtherance of those goals. As with any effective IEP, post-secondary goals should be clearly stated, deemed achievable, updated at least annually, and address three general areas — those that the student hopes to achieve after high school, those appropriate to the individual student, and those capable of being objectively measured — all focusing on education and training, employ-

ment potential, and independent-living skills. Appropriate questions to ask when developing an effective IEP include:

- What are your child's hopes and dreams?
- What skills are necessary in order for your child to achieve those hopes and dreams?
- What areas need attention in order for your child to master these skills?
- What services will help your child hone these skills? and
- How will you know that the services are or have been effective?

Effective communication with your special-education child is only the first step to ensuring that he or she receives appropriate and successful transition services. In fact,



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education child is entitled to, and which are appropriate given his or her academic achievement and potential post-secondary life skills.

Whether your child wishes to attend college is another important consideration, because the answer to this question often dictates the transition services requested and received. For example, both formal and informal assessments should be performed in order to evaluate how your child compares to other students, as well as identify his or her strengths and weaknesses, all in an attempt to make a determination about whether college, trade school, life class, or another avenue should be pursued.

In order to identify your child's needs, preferences, interests, and strengths, the following assessments can be performed. Formal assessments are standardized tests that include areas covering knowledge on independent living skills, the student's

such communication will assure optimal results only if it is committed to writing. In other words, not only must the IEP be well-written, but the services requested to be provided by the school district must be memorialized in writing via the Transition Planning Form (TPF) in order to ensure that all services requested are accepted and document what services are to be provided.

It is important to note that, like any area of an IEP, the transition-services provision is a 'living thing.' That is, your child may want to attend college when they are 14 or 15, but by the time they turn 16 or 17, they may decide that a vocational skill is more desirable. In such cases, effective communication with both your

child and the school district is imperative in order to assure that transitional services are adjusted when necessary so that the post-high-school student is on the desired path.

While this article contains only general considerations with regard to transition services, like any other part of special education, it is vital that you as a parent are an active participant in the process. Advocacy on behalf of your child, as well as self-advocacy, are the only ways to ensure that he or she receives the transition services necessary to promote a successful post-secondary life. ❖

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