

IDEA 2004 Close Up: Transition Planning

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When Congress recently updated the nation's special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), it sought to improve postsecondary results for students with disabilities by requiring public high schools to provide better transition planning.

Recognizing that the graduation rates for students with disabilities — including those with specific learning disabilities — continue to improve¹, Congress stated that providing effective transition services to promote successful post-school education or employment becomes an important measure of a school's accountability for the post-secondary performance of its students. To strengthen transition planning, several new requirements have been added to the IDEA.

What are Transition Services?

Transition services are intended to be a coordinated set of activities, provided to the student by the school and sometimes other agencies, to promote a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment, and independent living. IDEA 2004 adds a new requirement that transition services be based on the student's **strengths**, as well as their preferences and interests. The addition of "strengths" makes it clear that the development of transition goals should focus on and build upon what the student **can** do — not focus entirely on what the student **can't** do.

Activities developed as part of transition services must be designed to be within a "**results-oriented**" process as opposed to the earlier requirement for "**outcome-oriented**," signaling a clear intent to ensure that the process includes activities designed to produce success for the individual. The process must focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student to facilitate movement from school to post-school activities.

When Does Transition Planning Begin?

Previous requirements regarding the age at which transition planning should begin were somewhat ambiguous — some activities were to begin at age 14, and others at age 16. IDEA 04 has established one clear starting age requirement for the start of transition planning. IEP Teams must now include transition planning in the first IEP that will be in effect when the child turns 16 years of age.

Many transition experts and advocates feel that age 16 is too late to start transition planning. IDEA 04's federal regulations, finalization of which is expected by the end of 2005, make it clear that IEP Teams are free to begin transition planning at an earlier age if the team determines it appropriate to do

so. Clearly, many students with learning disabilities can benefit from transition planning activities that begin in middle school.

As full and equal members of the IEP team, parents should feel comfortable suggesting that transition planning activities begin earlier than age 16. Such early activities can include training in self-advocacy skills. Such skills have been found to play a critical role in the post-school success of students with disabilities, yet a recent study² found that only 3 percent of secondary students with disabilities who participate in general education academic classes have been provided with self-advocacy training.

What Does Transition Planning Include?

IDEA 04 dramatically expands the requirements for transition planning from merely a statement of needed transition services to:

- Development of **appropriate measurable postsecondary goals** based upon **age-appropriate transition assessments** related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills;

These **goals should reflect the student's strengths, preferences, and interests**. In determining such goals, the IEP team (including the student) must determine what instruction and educational experiences will help prepare the student for a successful transition from secondary education to post-secondary life.

Age-appropriate transition assessments might include such things as interest inventories and other assessment tools that can help identify an individual's special talents.

- Development of a **statement of the transition services** (including courses of study) **needed to assist the student in reaching those goals**.

The statement of transition services should relate directly to the student's postsecondary goals.

The activities contained in the transition services should:

- Define every activity that must occur,
- Identify who has primary responsibility for each activity, and
- Specify the dates that each activity will begin and end.

A student's courses of study should be meaningful to the student's future plans and motivate the student to complete his or her education. Given the unacceptably high drop out rate among students with disabilities — 39

percent of students with learning disabilities drop out of school³ — it is critical that courses of study engage student interest and work to minimize the risk for dropping out prior to graduation.

IDEA 2004 retains the requirement to notify the student, at least one year in advance, of rights that will transfer to the student upon reaching the age of majority. Reaching the age of majority is an important juncture in a student's life, and parents should fully understand some of the options available to them at this point. In most states, the age of majority is 18, but there are exceptions.

Who Participates in the Transition Planning Process?

Transition services are an integral part of a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), beginning with the first IEP in effect when the student turns 16. As such, determining transition services is a task for all IEP team members, including the student and parents.

Genuine student and parent participation — active involvement in and contribution to the planning process — is critical to achieving good transition results. Unfortunately, a recent study found that a quarter of students with learning disabilities either do not attend or attend but participate only minimally in their transition planning meetings. Another 60 percent attend and participate moderately. Only 14 percent both attend and take a leadership role in the process.

The same study found that while 85 percent of parents (or guardians) are active participants in transition planning, parents reported that IEP goals are determined **mostly** by the school. Goals are determined by the parents and student only about 20 percent of the time.⁴

Under IDEA 2004, schools continue to be responsible for bringing in representatives from other agencies, such as rehabilitative services or post-secondary education, to be part of the transition planning process. Such agencies may also be responsible for the delivery of some of the services needed by the student. Should other agencies fail to provide the agreed upon transition services, schools must find alternative ways to meet the transition objectives for the student.

Recent findings indicate that there is a need to improve the participation of outside representatives in transition planning. For example, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors participated in only 13 percent of the IEPs, and other representatives (postsecondary education representatives, advocates, consultants) participated in only 3 percent of the IEPs.⁴

Exiting Special Education

Schools are not required to conduct an evaluation before terminating special education services for students, due either to graduation from secondary school with a regular diploma, or to exceeding the age for services in their state. As a result, students are often left without the necessary information and documentation of their disability that is required to access supports and services in post-school activities, such as higher education.

IDEA 2004 creates a new requirement for schools that is sure to help students with learning disabilities make a smoother transition to post-school employment or education. Schools must now provide a “**Summary of Performance**” to students whose special education eligibility is terminating due the circumstances mentioned above. This new summary must include information on the student’s academic achievement and functional performance and include recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting postsecondary goals. Congress intended for this summary to provide specific, meaningful, and understandable information to the student, the student’s family, and any agency, including postsecondary schools, which may provide services to the student upon transition. While schools are not required to conduct any new assessments or evaluations in order to provide the summary, students and their parents should expect that the information provided in the summary is adequate to satisfy the disability documentation required under other federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

While a student’s Summary of Performance is not part of the transition planning process, IEP teams should discuss it prior to termination of special education services to ensure that the information provided in the summary will, in fact, sufficiently satisfy any requirements connected with the student’s post-school goals.

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References

1. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, *25TH Annual (2003) Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, vol. 1*, Washington, D.C. 2005
2. *Planning for Students with Disabilities. A Special Topic Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. 2004. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
3. *25th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, Table 1-16. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education
4. *Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities. A Special Topic Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*, 2004. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

Other Resources

Websites

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
Key Provisions on Transition: IDEA 1997 compared to H.R. 1350 (IDEIA 2004)
<http://www.ncset.org/publications/related/ideatransition.asp>

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
Transition Planning: A Team Effort
<http://nichcy.org/pubs/transum/ts10txt.htm>

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
Parent Brief: Age of Majority: Preparing Your Child for Making Good Choices
<http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=318>

Information Center on Disabilities and Gifted Education
Designing Individualized Education Program (IEP) Transition Plans
<http://ericec.org/digests/e598.html>

U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Civil Rights
Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Ed: Know Your Rights & Responsibilities
<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>