

# Promoting Successful Transitions for Students with Disabilities

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One of the key purposes of public education is to prepare young people to reach their full potential as independent adults and engaged citizens. This transition to adulthood may be especially challenging for youth with disabilities. Students enrolled in special education often need additional supports and coordinated planning to prepare for employment, postsecondary education, and community living. Previous research has documented effective practices—such as family involvement, inclusion in general education, work-based learning, and interagency collaboration—that can help support the transition to adulthood. School districts must work in collaboration with families, employers, and other community agencies to implement these effective practices and facilitate successful transitions for youth with disabilities.

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## Why Does Transition Matter?

Federal special education policy mandates transition services for youth with disabilities. In fact, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004<sup>1</sup> describes the fundamental purpose of a free, appropriate public education as the preparation of youth with disabilities for further education, employment, and independent living. To meet IDEA's requirements, all special education students aged 16 years or older are required to have transition services included as part of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Transition services should be designed to facilitate movement from school to postschool activities—which may include postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing education, adult services, independent living, and/or community participation. During the transition planning process, schools need to provide students with opportunities to discuss what they want for their future, what they perceive as barriers to reaching their goals, and what accommodations will support their efforts.

Although federal legislation mandating transition planning and transition services has been in place since 1990, significant gaps in postschool outcomes persist. Compared to their peers without disabilities, students with disabilities are:

- Less likely to graduate from high school;
- more likely to enroll in community colleges or short-term vocational programs;
- less likely to enroll in four-year colleges or universities; and
- more likely to be unemployed or employed in low-wage, part-time jobs.

Similar disparities exist in transition outcomes for students with disabilities in California. In the class of 2019, almost three quarters (70.7 percent) of students with disabilities received a high school diploma, while 85.9 percent of all students received a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup> Approximately half of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education one year after high school.<sup>3</sup> A 2019 Legislative Analyst report found that, following high school, only 25 percent of students with disabilities were competitively employed and under 10 percent were participating in subsidized employment or training programs.<sup>4</sup>

## How Can Schools Make a Difference?

Decades of research examining the transition to adulthood have documented a set of effective practices that can improve postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities. However, transition services cannot be solely school based, or solely provided by special educators. Effective transition practices rely on collaboration between special and

general educators and on building connections with families, employers, and community agencies. Here are four key areas that can make a difference:

### Family Involvement

We know that family involvement in education benefits all children; it is particularly important for the success of students with disabilities—in school and postschool. Families can serve as both advocates and role models, providing consistency and stability during the transition from high school into adulthood. Previous research has found that:

- Students with disabilities whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to be employed after high school;
- parent involvement in education at home is also a predictor of enrollment in postsecondary education;
- between 2 and 4 years after high school, students with disabilities whose parents were involved in their education were 41 times more likely to attend postsecondary education than students whose parents were not involved.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

### Facilitating Family Involvement

#### 1. Invite parents to be partners in the transition planning process.

A student's family should be an integral part of the IEP team and should contribute to decisions regarding annual IEP goals, services, and supports a student receives to prepare for the transition to adulthood.

#### 2. Provide information to parents about transition services and postschool options.

Schools should offer transition information nights and/or transition fairs to provide families with specific information about transition planning and community resources. Written materials should be offered in multiple languages and translation services should be available as needed.

#### 3. Refer families to other resources, such as Parent Training and Information Centers.

These federally funded centers can provide critical information, support, and guidance to parents and organizations as well as provide families with opportunities to share personal experiences and perspectives with other families facing similar issues.<sup>7</sup>

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Research also shows that family expectations and aspirations are an important factor influencing transition outcomes for youth with disabilities. For example:

- Parent expectations predict high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment for students with disabilities; and
- young adults with significant disabilities whose parents expected them to obtain postschool work were more than 5 times more likely to have paid community employment within 2 years after leaving high school.<sup>6</sup>

### **Inclusion in General Education**

IDEA requires local education agencies to serve students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). While each student's LRE is individually determined by their IEP team, emphasis should be placed on maximizing opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with students without disabilities. Whereas students who have mild/moderate service needs may be mostly educated in general education classrooms (with push-in or pull-out special education and related services), students who have severe service needs may be mostly educated in special day classrooms where interactions with peers without disabilities only occur during recess, lunch, physical education, or elective courses. According to California's last available Annual Performance Report, only 54 percent of students with disabilities are included in general education environments for 80 percent or more of their school day and 21.5 percent of students with disabilities are included in general education environments for less than 40 percent of their school day.<sup>8</sup>

A sizeable body of research demonstrates that the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classroom settings is an important predictor of intermediate and postschool outcomes. We know that:

- Students with disabilities who are educated in general education environments for 80 percent to 100 percent of the school day have fewer absences, higher academic performance, higher rates of grade progression and on-time graduation, and higher rates of college attendance and employment; and
- enrollment of students with disabilities in career and technical education (CTE) courses is predictive of postsecondary employment and enrollment in postsecondary education.<sup>9</sup>

## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

### Enhancing Inclusion in General Education

**1. Provide staff with professional learning and coaching.**

School personnel—specifically general and special education teachers as well as paraprofessionals—are essential to promoting the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education courses and in college and career development opportunities such as CTE courses. Professional learning could involve collaborative learning support models, universal design for learning, multitiered systems of support, and differentiated instruction.

**2. Leverage existing general education initiatives designed to boost college and career readiness.**

Increasing access for students with disabilities to general education classroom settings will correspondingly increase these students' access to a school's college and career development initiatives such as career pathways; volunteer and paid internships and work experiences; interviews with employers; engagement with community members and mentors; job shadowing; and college visits.

**3. Develop meaningful family engagement activities to support inclusion of students with disabilities in general education.**

Given the critical role students with disabilities and their families play on the IEP team in making decisions about transition planning and education in the least restrictive environment, schools would benefit from including students with disabilities in the outreach in, selection in, and participation in the school district's career development programming. Doing so will support students with disabilities and their families in actively participating in the transition planning process. It will also strengthen expectations for and break stereotypes about students with disabilities.

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## Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning is a critical component of transition best practices and an effective tool for preparing youth for future employment and career opportunities. Several decades' worth of research in special education has shown that participation in work-based learning is one of the most consistent predictors of postschool employment for students with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> Studies have also found that students with disabilities who participate in either paid or unpaid work experience during their high school years are significantly more likely to be engaged in postschool employment.<sup>11</sup> Potential benefits for youth with disabilities who participate in work-based learning include:

- Gaining career readiness skills including “soft skills”;
- increasing knowledge of specific occupational skills and workplace settings;
- establishing a work history and connections with employers that can aid in future job searches; and
- developing awareness of a variety of occupations in order to make informed career choices.

To reap these benefits, students can participate in a range of work-based learning options that vary in intensity, structure, and scope. Job shadowing and job site visits introduce students to the expectations of various careers by allowing them to observe the daily routines, activities, and requirements of an occupation. Service learning is another work-based learning option that provides an opportunity for youth to participate in meaningful community service while gaining valuable teamwork and leadership skills. Service learning projects are most often linked to the school curriculum and driven by specifically defined learning goals.

School-based businesses are student-operated businesses that produce goods or services as part of an ongoing school program. For example, students may operate a food services cart or work in a small manufacturing company based in a high school. School-based businesses can provide an ideal opportunity for students with disabilities to learn work skills in a supervised setting prior to entering a more intensive internship or paid job in a community setting. Lastly, internships are paid or unpaid placements in community employment settings that provide students with longer-term, structured job experiences in an established business setting. Internships are dependent on successful partnerships with community employers and can also be enhanced by collaboration with local agencies such as vocational rehabilitation or other federal job training programs.

## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

### Developing Work-Based Learning Opportunities

- 1. Provide students with a variety of opportunities for career exploration.**  
For example, students can learn about career options by listening to guest speakers from different occupations or participating in field trips or job shadows. Since many students with disabilities have been exposed to only a limited set of postschool options and may have restricted aspirations for their futures, it is important to include a wide variety of career opportunities, such as nontraditional, technical, or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) occupations.
- 2. Encourage students with disabilities to engage in career-related learning experiences available to all youth.**  
Students with disabilities can benefit from participating in CTE courses, service learning, internships, and/or career pathways.
- 3. Support students in obtaining paid or unpaid work experiences while they are still in high school.**  
Education personnel should work closely with key stakeholders to explore, design, and coordinate a variety of structured work experiences for students with disabilities.

For more information, see PACE brief “The Benefits of Work Experiences for Students with Disabilities as they Prepare for Self-Sufficiency.”

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## Interagency Collaboration

Before a student with a disability reaches age 16, their IEP team must develop a transition plan designed to facilitate movement from school to postschool activities. This school-based transition plan may be one of many service plans students with disabilities will receive from multiple agencies that serve students who are navigating a complicated and multifaceted transition process along with their families. We know that:

- Interagency collaboration is an important evidence-based predictor of postschool employment and education success for students with disabilities; and
- “transition services” are a coordinated set of activities designed to help students with disabilities prepare for postsecondary education or the workforce.

Yet many of the agencies tasked with serving students with disabilities and their families are doing their work concurrently but not together.

Federal and state legislation has been developed to improve connections and collaborations between agencies who provide postsecondary transition services for students with disabilities. The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) recently redefined the role of the U.S. Rehabilitation Services Administration in improving postschool transition outcomes for students with disabilities by mandating collaboration between state Departments of Rehabilitation (DORs), America’s Job Centers (One-Stop Centers), and local education agencies to provide pre-employment training services such as job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, postsecondary opportunity counseling, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy skills training for students with disabilities.

Regions in California were tasked with forming Local Partnership Agreements (LPAs). These LPAs identified ways in which Local Education Agencies (LEAs), DOR districts, and regional centers can work together to streamline service delivery, engage their communities, and increase competitive integrated employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

### Improving Interagency Collaboration

**1. Partner with appropriate community agencies supporting a student prior to their IEP meeting (with family/student permission).**

It is critical for non-LEA based agencies to be represented at a student's annual IEP meeting to ensure the development of a comprehensive and coordinated transition plan.

**2. Create community resource maps and provide training to assist students and their families with navigating the postsecondary transition process.**

Training opportunities could include providing students and their families with community resources; offering advocacy, community education, and employment opportunities; and using Person-Centered Planning tools.

**3. Get involved with their region's Local Partnership Agreement team.**

LPAs should expand beyond the required LPA partners (LEAs, the DOR, and regional centers) by engaging additional groups (such as postsecondary education institutions, adult service providers, disability resource agencies, employers, the business community, etc.) in promoting preparation for and achievement of competitive integrated employment for students and adults with disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

For more information on interagency collaboration, see PACE brief "Realizing One Integrated System of Care for Children."

## What's Next? Resources for Implementation

Local education agencies must work in collaboration with families, employers, and community agencies to build coordinated transition services and improve postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities in California. Transition services can be multifaceted and must be individualized to meet the unique needs of students and their families. Postschool opportunities are also community dependent and will vary across rural and urban sectors. The following resources provide useful tools and concrete strategies for schools as they seek to build and extend transition services within their communities.

**Disability Rights California. (2015). *Transition services for students.***

Publication with information and suggestions about transition planning in high school, including information about legalities, procedures, and advocacy.

<https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/publications/transition-services-for-students>

**National Association of Special Education Teachers. (n.d.). *Transition planning timeline checklist.***

Checklist with suggested timeline for transition planning steps.

[https://www.naset.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forms\\_Checklist\\_Etc/Transition\\_Services/Transition\\_Planning\\_Timeline\\_Chklist.pdf](https://www.naset.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Forms_Checklist_Etc/Transition_Services/Transition_Planning_Timeline_Chklist.pdf)

**National Technical Assistance Center on Transition. (2016). *Transition assessment toolkit (4th ed.)*.**

Free resource document with information about transition assessment and list of assessment tools.

Download from <https://www.transitionta.org/transitionplanning>

**WarmLine Family Resource Center. (2018). *Moving on: Transition to adult living for young adults with disabilities.***

Free online transition toolkit with information about local programs and services.

Download from <http://www.warmlinefrc.org/warmline-publications.html>

**Virginia Commonwealth University. (2009). *Going to college: A resource for teens with disabilities.***

Provides students with info about how college works and how to plan for it.

<http://www.going-to-college.org>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea>
- <sup>2</sup> California Department of Education. (2019). *Academic engagement: Graduation rate*. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2019/academic-engagement-graduation-rate>
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2018). *Annual performance report, 2016. Indicator 14: Post-school outcomes: Historical data and targets*. <https://osep.grads360.org/#report/apr/2016B/Indicator14/HistoricalData?state=CA&ispublic=true>
- <sup>4</sup> Petek, G. (2019). *Overview of special education in California*. Legislative Analyst's Office. <https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2019/4110/overview-spec-ed-110619.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> Papay, C. K., & Bambara, L. M. (2014). Best practices in transition to adult life for youth with intellectual disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 37(3), 136–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143413486693>
- <sup>6</sup> Carter, E. W. (2014, December). *What matters most: Research on elevating parent expectations*. Partnerships in Employment. [https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/64CB422A-ED08-43F0-F795CA9DE364B6BE/2015\\_carter\\_parent\\_expectations\\_brief.pdf](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/64CB422A-ED08-43F0-F795CA9DE364B6BE/2015_carter_parent_expectations_brief.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> See <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/california>
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2018). *Annual performance report, 2016. Indicator 5: Education environments (children 6–21)*. <https://osep.grads360.org/#report/apr/2016B/Indicator5/HistoricalData?state=CA&ispublic=true>
- <sup>9</sup> Theobald, R., Goldhaber, D., Gratz, T., & Holden, K. L. (2017, September). *Career and technical education, inclusion, and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities*. CALDER Working Paper 177. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED583616.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> Dong, S., Fabian, E., & Luecking, R. G. (2016). Impacts of school structural factors and student factors on employment outcomes for youth with disabilities in transition: A secondary data analysis. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin* 59, 224–234.
- <sup>11</sup> Luecking, R. G., & Wittenburg, D. (2009). Providing supports to youth with disabilities transition to adulthood: Case descriptions from the Youth Transition Demonstration. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 30, 241–251.
- <sup>12</sup> See <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/cie/elementor-11522>

## Author Biographies

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## Related Publications

Gee, K. ***Students with Disabilities in the CORE Districts.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.

McFarlane, F., & Guillermo, M. ***Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.

Myung, J., & Hough, H. ***Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities: A Summary of the PACE Policy Research Panel.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.

Powell, R., Estes, E., & Briscoe, A. ***Realizing One Integrated System of Care for Children.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.



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