

Postsecondary Transition Planning

Tiers 1, 2, & 3

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Postsecondary transition is the transition of high school students to their next stage in life, whether it be a two- or four- year college or technical school, the workforce, an assisted living facility, or other options. Planning for these transitions with students is critical in order to incorporate individual student goals and desires, and to increase the likelihood of a smooth transition. These transitional supports are important for all students, but are required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to begin at age 16 for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Particularly for students with disabilities, planning for the transition out of high school is critical in ensuring that they will continue to receive appropriate occupational, social, and environmental supports. Roughly 77% of students with disabilities report wanting to pursue postsecondary education, but only 19% go on to enroll at a two-year and 10% at four-year institution, respectively (Newman, 2005).

This brief will provide information on postsecondary transition, effective transition practices, and specific information for transitioning students with disabilities.

What is Postsecondary Transition Planning?

Postsecondary transition planning are efforts by school staff to prepare students for positive postsecondary outcomes including postsecondary education and employment. Doing so may also include connecting students and their families to community services and supports, as well as planning for housing, transportation, and other needs.

Rather than only provided an isolated or separate program on post-secondary transition, schools should emphasize relevant courses and transition-focused education throughout the school day (Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009). Transition-focused education highlights transition planning as a foundation of education that guides all educational programs rather than an add-on activity (Kohler & Field, 2003). Utilizing academic, career, and extracurricular instruction along with participation in local activities, transition-focused education guides students toward successful adult outcomes and increases rates of high school completion (Test et al., 2009).

Why is Postsecondary Transition Planning Important?

Postsecondary transition planning can serve dual purposes by motivating students to complete high school while also preparing them to face their professional postsecondary future. Many studies have shown the necessity of at least a high school diploma for successful future employment and positive financial opportunities (Chan, Kato, Davenport, & Guven, 2003). As



such, the need for postsecondary education has dramatically increased over the last thirty years. Specifically, Carnevale and Desrochers (2003) reported that in 1973, only 28% of prime-aged workers (ages 30 – 59) had any postsecondary education, but in the year 2000, 59% of prime-aged workers had at least some college education.

Postsecondary transition planning is especially critical for students with disabilities, as 28% of students with disabilities do not graduate (Test et al., 2009). This increases their likelihood of unemployment, lower wages, higher

otherwise disadvantaged. For example, poor academic records, a family history of school drop-out, high mobility rates, and single-parent homes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) are variables correlated with an increased risk for dropping out, as well as risk factors for involvement in juvenile detention (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnsworth, & Jang 1991). This makes preventing student drop out and encouraging high school graduation significant in an effort to potentially reduce youth incarceration. Demographic variables such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status are also indicators for the need for additional supports (e.g., postsecondary transi-



rates of incarceration, and restricted access to postsecondary education (Test et al., 2009). These individuals lag behind students without disabilities in regards to rate of school completion, post-school employment, and participation in postsecondary education (Benz, Lindstrom, Unruh, & Waintrup, 2004). In an attempt to promote positive postsecondary transition for students receiving special education services in schools, IDEA mandates that schools aid students with an IEP with postsecondary planning (Trainor, Morningstar, & Murray, 2016).

Postsecondary transition planning might also benefit other groups of students who are

tion planning). The U.S. Department of Education (2005) stated that although ethnic minorities are increasingly enrolling in postsecondary education, the gap between Whites and both African Americans and Hispanics completing college has widened since 1971. In addition, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend four year colleges or universities than students from middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds (Walpole, 2003). Thus, effective transition practices could be utilized with these groups in an effort to increase high school graduation and encourage enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education.

What Do We Know About Postsecondary Transition Planning

A literature search on “PsycInfo” of “postsecondary transition” resulted in 242 results, with the earliest result being from 1985. This shows that postsecondary transition is a relatively new field, with much research to be done. Despite the lack of scholarly articles on the topic, much effort has been put into establishing effective transition practices due to the critical role it plays in setting students up for success after high school. Researchers have also found evidence that supports the use of transition-focused education to increase school completion. Thus, effective transition-focused education practices should be utilized to assist students, in both general and special education settings in successfully completing high school and preparing them for their next steps in life.

Effective Transition Practices

High school completion and postsecondary success should be the ultimate goal for every student. As such, simply collecting credits is not enough. Helping students think about their future is an imperative step in motivating them to become engaged in the classroom, complete high school, and plan for their future. Statistically, students who received more community-

based instruction, vocational instruction, money handling instruction, and the opportunity to choose their classes were more likely to complete high school than those who did not (Test et al., 2009). This is especially true for student’s diagnosed with disabilities (Trainor et al., 2016). Researchers have suggested that the following secondary transition practices are associated with greater student retention and success while in high school and better employment and education outcomes after leaving school:

1. Direct, individualized tutoring and support to complete homework assignments, attend class, and stay focused on school
 2. Participation in vocational education classes during the last 2 years of high school, especially classes that offer occupationally specific instruction
 3. Participation in paid work experience in the community during the last 2 years of high school
 4. Competence in functional academic (e.g., reading, math, writing, problem solving) and transition (e.g., money management, personal-social, career awareness, self-advocacy, goal setting) skills
 5. Participation in a transition planning process that promotes self-determination
 6. Direct assistance to understand and connect with resources related to post-school goals (e.g., two- or four-year colleges or universities, community colleges, vocational rehabilitation)
 7. Graduation from high school
- (Benz et al., 2004, p. 40).

Taxonomy for Transition Planning

The Taxonomy for Transition Planning highlights five key areas for postsecondary transition planning, which include: student-focused planning,



student development, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure (Test et al., 2009). Other areas to consider include transition planning for students with disabilities and how to encourage self-determination. Each of these seven areas plays an integral role in the ability of the student to transition effectively into his or her academic future, as well as helping educational teams to successfully prepare students for that transition while ensuring that all of the pieces of the academic puzzle are working together to facilitate student success.

Student-focused planning. Student-focused planning is the participation of students in their own educational planning based on their postsecondary goals. Studies have shown a positive correlation between student-focused planning strategies and high school completion (Test et al., 2009). It is important to assist in developing the student's self-awareness to set goals, both short- and long-term. By practice and application of student-focused planning, students develop and strengthen their self-determination skills. In order for students to be successful in student-focused planning, they must be self-aware, share their awareness with others, and advocate for themselves. Student-focused planning includes reflecting both on when progress is made and when it is not (Kohler & Field, 2003). Student-focused strategies consist of student involvement in developing their Individual Education Plan (IEP) if applicable and participation in their postsecondary planning (Test et al., 2009). These strategies specifically recommend:

- Ensuring IEP teams identify and engage responsible agencies, resources, and accommodations required for a student to successfully achieve positive post-school outcomes
- Promoting the value of preparing for, and participating in, postsecondary education
- Identifying specific types and levels of accommodations and supports a student will need to participate in post-school environments

(Test et al., 2009, p. 22)

Student development. Student development refers to life and employment skills instruction, career and vocational curricula, support services, assessment, and structured work experiences (Test et al., 2009). Studies show that a student's experience with career-related work and fulfillment of self-identified transition goals were strongly linked to graduation and employment (Kohler & Field, 2003). Furthermore, research reveals that instruction in self-determination, self-advocacy, goal setting and attainment, problem solving, and leisure skills are essential to high school graduation.

Vocational education is central to students' postsecondary planning and dropout prevention for students with an emotional or behavioral disorder, as they are in greater danger of dropping out if they do not attend vocational classes (Test et al., 2009). Statistically, if students participated in any of three types of vocational courses, students were more than twice as likely



Photo credit: <http://metrosmag.co.za/press/misconceptions-about-vocational-education-and-training-hamper-south-african-economic-growth/>

to stay in school. These courses include generic vocational programming (e.g., classes focusing on employability skills across a variety of occupations), occupationally specific programming (e.g., carpentry, mechanics, or plumbing), and on-the-job programming (e.g., work-release, or the opportunity to earn credits for work in the field under the supervision of a vocational teacher).

Interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration. Interagency collaboration stresses the involvement of various community contributors in an effort to improve educational outcomes for students. It includes having a collaborative framework and service delivery system that engages community organizations, agencies, and businesses. Collaboration between school and community agencies provide needed services and support to students and their families and deliver support to school staff from additional service providers. These collaborations have been found to reduce suspensions (Test et al., 2009). Moreover, interdisciplinary and integrated courses increase the relevance of school for students and may decrease student dropout rates (Test et al., 2009).

Family involvement. Family involvement is imperative for ensuring success in nearly every area of education, including school completion. As such, empowering and encouraging families to advocate for their students is an important factor in dropout prevention. Also, meeting the family's needs by connecting them with appropriate external services and providing them with opportunities to be involved in their student's life are significant for increasing the likelihood of high school graduation.

Program structure. Program structure focuses on characteristics of school structures and policies that maintain transition-focused education for all students. It includes "program philosophy, program evaluation, strategic planning, program policy, human resource development, and resource allocation" (Test et al., 2009, p. 26). Program structures that provide flexible programming and allow for credit recovery or use student academic performance, attendance, and behavioral data to establish a student's need for support (e.g., multi-tiered systems of support, positive behavioral interventions and supports, dropout screening) can reduce student dropout rate (Test et al., 2009).

The dropout prevention strategies listed below are related to program structures and reflect student-centered services that focus on outcomes for students:

1. Allowing and encouraging student participation in curricula that will prepare them for their postsecondary goals
2. Supporting career development and transition planning beginning in the middle grades across general, vocational, and special education
3. Continually assessing needs regarding secondary programming
4. Engaging in strategic planning regarding long-term outcome goals
5. Staff development activities
6. Services necessary to reduce school dropout and human resource development in job development, program marketing, effective instruction, curriculum modifications, and progress monitoring

Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities

In addition to the five primary areas of transition planning introduced by Test et al. (2009), there are specific regulations for students with disabilities that must be considered and followed when transition planning for these students. Unlike the majority of students, students with disabilities are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).



Schools are mandated by IDEA to provide students with disabilities with a plan meant to aid them in transitioning into life after secondary school (Trainor et al., 2016). Furthermore, students who receive transition assistance that includes plans for continuing IEP accommodations beyond high school are more likely to seek out and receive appropriate assistance in their postsecondary education (Newman, Madaus, & Javitz, 2016). Services that coordinate resources between the school and the community increase the likelihood that a student with disabilities will be able to transition successfully (Kochhar-Bryant & Greene, 2009). As such, regulations pertaining to postsecondary transition planning prepare students for success in future professional and educational settings (Wrightslaw, n.d.).

Required transition plans. Under the requirements of IDEA 2004, by the age of 16 (or younger, if determined necessary by the IEP team), a student's IEP must contain a statement of needed transition services (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The definition of these services includes a set of activities: (1) designed to be a results-oriented process focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the movement from school to post-school activities (e.g., post-secondary education, vocational training,

integrated employment), (2) based on the needs and interests of the student, and (3) incorporate components of instruction, related services, community experiences, development of employment and post-school adult living, and, as necessary, daily living and functional skills (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Transition goals should be developed after the IEP team determines the instructional and educational experiences that will most greatly benefit the students.

In addition, IDEA requires that a representative of any agency that will likely be responsible for providing or paying for transition services be present at IEP meetings; if these agencies fail to provide the intended services, the school must find alternative ways to meet the needs of the student. The student must also be in attendance at IEP meetings, under IDEA 2004 requirements (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). If the student cannot be in attendance, the school must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the preferences and interests of the student are incorporated into the plan.

Rights of students with disabilities. Students are eligible for services provided under IDEA until they graduate with a regular diploma or exceed the age limit set forth by IDEA (21 years of age). Students receiving any diploma

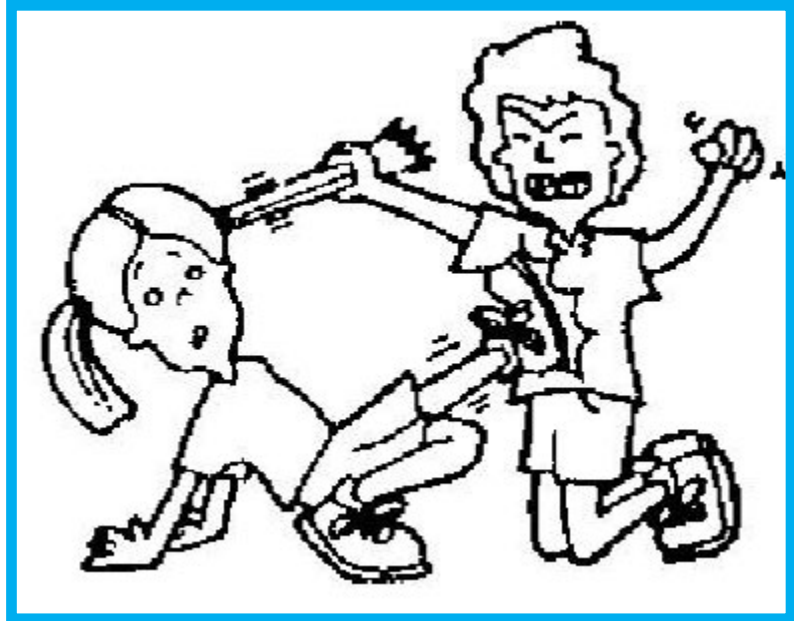
outside of the regular graduation diploma are still eligible to continue receiving services until a regular diploma is earned or the maximum age is reached (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). However, the student must be notified one year prior to reaching the age of majority (18 in most states, 19 in Nebraska) of the changes that will occur once the student reaches that age. At this point, the student is presumed to be capable of making his/her own decisions regarding education, future expectations, and goals, and thus, must be informed



that his/her rights under IDEA will be transferred from the parent(s)/ guardian(s) to the student. These rights include: notification of meetings, notification and consent for evaluation, selection of participants who attend IEP meetings, and approval of the contents of the IEP (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Students with emotional disturbance. Because a significant number of students with disabilities drop out prior to completing their secondary education, it is imperative that IEP teams work with parents and their students receiving services in order to ensure that appropriate courses and educational supports are put in place to assist students in meeting their future education and career goals. Research conducted in the area of student and parent involvement in IEP development has demonstrated that this involvement is linked to successful transitions from school to post-school programs (Greene, 2003; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Kohler, 1993; Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010). Therefore, in order to keep students engaged and increase the success of individual transition plans it is imperative that parents and students are actively involved in the process.

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) have specific needs in post-secondary transition planning. Two years after leaving school, only 59% of students with EBD were employed, with that number dropping to 53% 3 - 5 years out of high school. Only 40% of EBD young adults live independently five years out of high school. Thus, teachers and parents of students with EBD should involve the youth in their IEP goals, and be active members in choosing classes, finding vocational opportunities, and learning how to live independently (Cheney, 2010). They may also need ties to local mental health services which can support them beyond the secondary education.



Self-Determination

Self-determination is the concept that all individuals have the right to control and direct their own lives. Teaching students self-determination can assist them in making choices and taking charge of their future. The actions of a self-determined individual would demonstrate acting autonomously, regulating their own behavior, and initiating and responding to events in a self-realizing manner. The process of learning these capabilities is comprised of real-world experiences, including taking risks, making mistakes, and evaluating the results (Bremer, Kachgal, & Schoeller, 2003).

Self-determination for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities, in particular, need to exercise self-determination and be self-aware of how their disability might affect their academic learning, relationships, employment, and community involvement in order to set realistic goals for their future (Milsom, Akos, & Thompson, 2004). Self-awareness can help guide students in making decisions, developing plans, and using transition services (Bremer et al., 2003; Milsom et al., 2004). Too often, students with disabilities are not involved or encouraged to take part in developing their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or their post-

secondary preparatory programs. Lack of involvement puts students at a disadvantage, does not prepare them for postsecondary education, and increases the likelihood that they will drop out of high school (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003).

Conclusion

Postsecondary transition planning is how schools assist students in preparing for postsecondary education or employment after high school. This vital educational component is required in IEPs for any student with disabilities, aged 16 and older. However, transition planning is also helpful for other students who are at-risk for dropping out or are uncertain about what they want to do after high school. There are several useful evidence-based transition practices, including the completion of vocational education coursework, involving students in their IEPs and or transition planning process, and changing program structures to those that have proven to be effective in reducing post-secondary failure. Additionally, there are several areas of planning that need to be addressed in order to aid students in successfully completing school; these areas include student-focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure, as well as fostering self-determination within the student. When these areas of planning are addressed, students who are transitioning out of high school, regardless of their disability status, have a better chance of being successful.

For examples of programs specifically intended to assist students and school staff with post-secondary transition planning see the Resource Brief: Programs for Post-Secondary Transition Planning at: <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/programs-for-post-secondary>.



See Other Related Briefs

These other strategy briefs of the K-12-engagement project may also be useful in assisting students with post-secondary transition planning (all are available at <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>):

- Dropout Screening and Early Warning
- Motivation
- Parent and Family Involvement
- Project RENEW
- School Community Collaboration
- Student Engagement

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