

TRANSITIONS

High School Students

Many parents and educators are aware that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was amended in 1990 to add "transition planning services" to the list of related services for students with educational disabilities. The regulations to the IDEA define transition services as:

... a coordinated set of activities for a student designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. The coordinated set of activities shall be based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests, and shall include instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. 20U.S.C.§1401(a)(19)(emphasis added).

Although the law requires that such services be initiated no later than age sixteen, it is recommended that transition planning occur for students as early as age fourteen.

Transition planning should be addressed at the annual I.E.P. review for every high school student who has an I.E.P. Ideally, the student should be included in this process. Active participation requires that the student have given some forethought to his or her likes, dislikes, abilities, strengths, and goals, and will have practiced ways to communicate these to the members of the I.E.P. team.

Conversely, parents and other I.E.P. team members must work on ways to incorporate the student into the transition planning process. This may mean shifting from a paternalistic mind set to one that recognizes the student's right to make choices, experience the joys or consequences of those choices, and learn from the experience. This may be very difficult to do as it requires the adults to relinquish some of the control that they have had over the student's education.

The activities that are identified should "coordinate," that is, they should be managed by one person who has the responsibility for seeing that the pieces fit together into a workable plan for the student and that each piece is carried out by the person or agency responsible. It is sometimes easier to identify the need, activity, goal, objective, person/agency responsible, area of focus or domain, baseline and criteria/measurement, if these are outlined in a matrix form. Several high schools in Jefferson County currently use such a matrix, titled "Goals and Objectives for Transition Planning." Domains include education, career/vocational, residential/community, recreation/leisure, social/interpersonal, and life skills/activities of daily living. When a student attains a goal, revises a goal, or adds a goal, the

matrix can be reviewed and adjusted for these changes. Parents can request an update of progress on one or all domains.

The most important aspect of transition planning is that the process focus on the individual student--the student's individual strengths, needs, interests, and goals. That does not mean that students will not participate in group instruction, group employment, or group recreational activities. It does mean that a student's program will reflect his or her unique strengths, needs, interests and goals.

Transition at Other Times

Although the IDEA specifically requires transition planning services from age 16-21, there may be other times in a student's education when transition planning is critical to educational success. These times include: (1) when a student is moving from the hospital setting to home/community and school; (2) when the student moves from preschool to kindergarten or first grade; (3) when the student moves from elementary school to middle school or junior high school; and (4) when the student moves from middle school/junior high to high school.

Hospital to Home and School

A child who has spent considerable time in a hospital setting requires transition planning before returning home or to school. Parents typically meet with the medical team to discuss continued care of the child upon return home. This kind of meeting is usually called discharge planning. It is very important that a representative from the child's school attend this meeting in order to ask questions of the staff and determine what kind of services the child will likely require in the school setting. For a child with ongoing medical needs, such as a tracheostomy or gastrostomy tube, this is the time to determine whether the child's needs could be met by a properly trained paraprofessional or whether this care can only be provided by a licensed nurse. In such cases, it is imperative that the nurse responsible for serving children at the school of attendance be present at the discharge meeting in order to address these on-going medical concerns. Answers to these questions often mean the difference between a child attending the home school or being bused to a more distant school.

Preschool to Elementary School

Similarly, when a student moves from the preschool setting to a kindergarten or first grade setting, the I.E.P. team should be convened prior to the move in order that the child's needs can be addressed, the services identified, and, if necessary, so that the staff or materials needed can be obtained prior to the child's enrollment. Moving from a three-day, two and one-half hour program to an all-day program or even a half-day program five days per week may be a significant change for a child with special needs. Planning for those needs in the new environment can greatly increase the child's chances for a successful transition. It is also helpful for the kindergarten or first grade teacher to understand thoroughly the child's current functioning and readiness skills. This is even more critical if the child's placement will be a regular education classroom for all or some of the day. For this reason, a representative from the elementary school and the identified teacher, if possible, should be invited to attend

an I.E.P. meeting in the spring preceding the student's anticipated enrollment in kindergarten or first grade.

Because a child moving from preschool to elementary school must qualify for IDEA services under one of thirteen specific disabilities, it is important for parents to familiarize themselves with the various disability "labels" as well as the potential placements available to their child. Parents should contact the area intervention director or assistant director for information about placement options based on the student's needs prior to the transition meeting.

Elementary School to Middle School

One of the most difficult transitions all students face, whether they have identified special needs or not, is the transition from elementary school to middle school/junior high school. There are several reasons why this transition is so challenging for students. During this stage of development, students experience physical and emotional changes that wreak havoc with their feelings, behavior, and sometimes even their physical health. In addition, the educational routine is quite different. Instead of one teacher, one teaching style, a familiar classroom and familiar expectations, the student is faced with multiple teachers, multiple teaching styles, multiple expectations, changing/finding classrooms, remembering to bring materials to every class, recording assignments (that may be due within the same time frame), completing assignments and turning them in on an independent basis, dealing with chaos in the hallways and a larger number of students, learning locker combinations, riding a bus, perhaps for the first time, and developing new social skills.

For students with special needs, this is often the most difficult educational transition they will make. It is therefore most helpful to request a transition planning meeting in the spring prior to the student's fall enrollment in middle school. Once again, it is very important to have in attendance a person from the middle school who can contribute to the revisions in the I.E.P. that may be necessary for the student in the new setting. Someone who knows the class schedule and scheduling process, program options, resources, and staff at the middle school can contribute a great deal to the development of an I.E.P. that meets the student's needs in the new environment and offers greater opportunity for a smooth transition and success.

It is highly recommended that the student begin to be involved in his or her own I.E.P. process during this time. Although it may not be appropriate for a student to participate in all aspects of the I.E.P., there are some portions of the meeting when it may be very appropriate for the student to attend, for example, when identifying needs and developing goals and objectives. Most adolescents have a need to participate in plans being made for them, and this is an excellent opportunity to meet that need.

Middle School to High School

For most students, the move to high school will not be as traumatic or difficult as the transition from elementary school to middle school. For some students, however, this change can be difficult. Due to the high degree of differentiation in curriculum at the high school level, it may be more difficult to achieve inclusion. Parents need to inquire how inclusion is to be achieved and who will be responsible for seeing that any needed accommodations and modifications are carried out. There

is also the need to address transition issues, as described above. Again, the student should be included in as much of the I.E.P. process as is appropriate.

Parents may well wish to become less involved in the I.E.P. process and the educational planning; however, it is more important than ever that parents be active participants. Parents should request a copy of their student's schedule every quarter or semester, whenever the class schedule changes. They should understand where the student is every period of the school day. Such knowledge is important for good advocacy and long-term planning.

Summary

Assisting a child with special needs through the education journey poses different challenges at different times. Planning for the obvious transitions can greatly increase the opportunities for students, parents and educators to experience success.