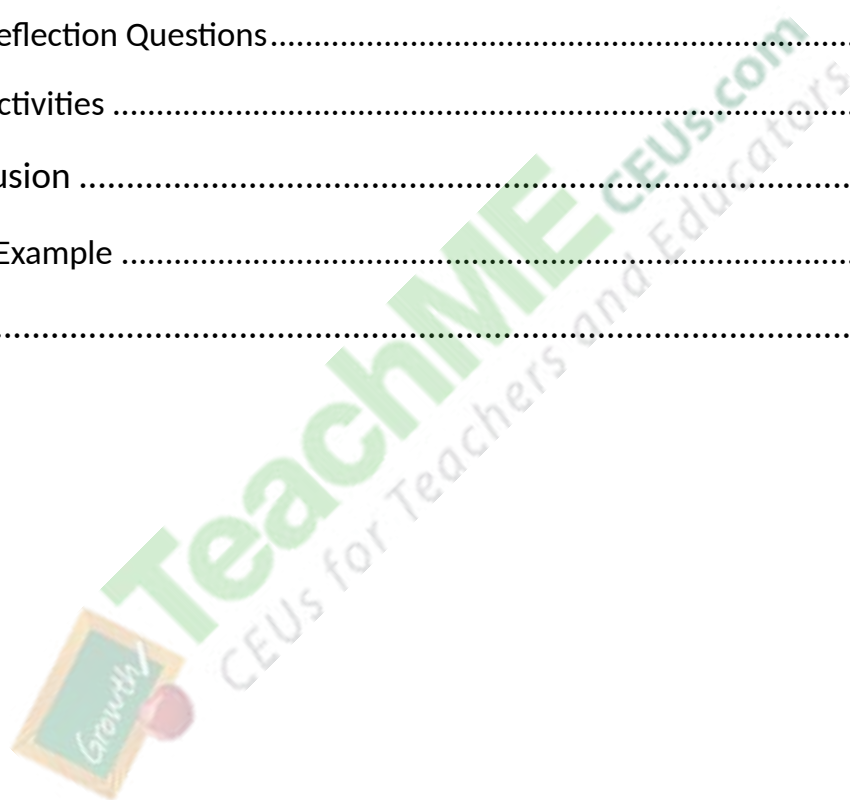


Future-Ready Transition Practices in Special Education



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Introduction

Preparing students with disabilities for life after high school is one of the most important responsibilities in special education. Transition planning is not simply a required part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP); it is a process that helps students build the skills, confidence, and supports needed to move into adult life with purpose. Whether students plan to pursue college, career training, employment, independent living, or a combination of these pathways, educators play a key role in helping them prepare for what comes next. This course, *Future-Ready Transition Practices in Special Education*, examines the essential practices that support effective transition planning and implementation. It begins with the legal and instructional foundations of transition planning, including the requirements of IDEA and the components of a high-quality transition IEP. It then explores the role of assessment and data-driven decision making in developing meaningful postsecondary goals and individualized supports. Finally, the course looks at how educators can prepare students for adult life through collaboration, student-centered planning, work-based learning, community partnerships, and connections to postsecondary and employment opportunities.

Throughout the course, the focus remains on creating transition practices that are student-centered, equitable, and future oriented. Effective transition planning requires more than compliance. It requires high expectations, strong partnerships, and a commitment to helping all students identify their goals and access the supports needed to achieve them. By the end of this course, educators will have a stronger understanding of how to design transition experiences that are both legally sound and genuinely meaningful for students and families.

Section 1: Foundations of Transition Planning in Special Education

Transition planning is a critical component of special education that supports students with disabilities as they prepare for life beyond high school. As students move toward adulthood, they must develop the skills, knowledge, and supports needed to successfully navigate postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation. This section introduces the foundational concepts that guide effective transition planning, including its purpose, legal requirements, and key components within the Individualized Education Program (IEP). It also explores the roles of team members involved in the process and the importance of coordinated, student-centered planning. Understanding these foundations is essential for educators to design meaningful transition experiences that lead to positive long-term outcomes for students with disabilities.

1.1 The Purpose and Importance of Transition Planning

Defining Transition Planning

Transition planning is a structured process that helps students with disabilities prepare for life after high school; within special education, transition planning focuses on helping students move from the school environment into adult roles such as postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation (Lo, 2024). These plans are typically developed through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and involve identifying a student's goals, strengths, and support needs in order to create coordinated services and experiences that support those goals (Virginia Department of Education, 2022).

The transition process is intended to be student-centered and based on the student's preferences, interests, and abilities.

In practice, transition planning is more than a single meeting or document within an IEP. It is an ongoing process that helps students develop the knowledge, experiences, and skills needed to pursue their chosen adult pathways (Texas Education Agency, 2025). This includes instruction, community experiences, employment preparation, and support services that help students build independence and confidence. For educators, transition planning requires collaboration with students, families, and other professionals to ensure that educational programs align with long-term goals. The process encourages schools to move beyond traditional academic instruction and consider the broader life outcomes that students with disabilities will experience after graduation.

Why Transition Planning Is Critical for Students With Disabilities

Transition planning is particularly important because students with disabilities often face additional challenges when moving from the K-12 school system to adult life. Research consistently shows that individuals with disabilities experience lower rates of employment, postsecondary education participation, and independent living compared with their peers without disabilities (Migliore et al., 2025). In 2023, only 27 percent of individuals with disabilities ages 16 to 19 were part of the labor force, compared with 37.5 percent of youth in the same age group who did not have disabilities (Migliore et al.). This gap becomes even more pronounced later in adulthood. By ages 45 to 54, the difference in employment rates between individuals with and without disabilities grows to nearly 45 percentage points. These long-standing disparities highlight the need for state education leaders to strengthen transition services so that students with disabilities are better prepared for employment and adult life (Migliore et al.).

These disparities highlight the importance of intentional planning and support during secondary education. Effective transition planning allows educators and families to address barriers early, provide meaningful learning experiences, and help students build the skills required for adulthood (White et al., 2025). Without structured transition supports, many students encounter a “service gap” after leaving the K–12 system because adult services and supports are often more limited and require individuals to actively seek them out (White). Transition planning also promotes student independence and self-determination. Self-determination refers to the knowledge and skills that allow individuals to act independently and make decisions about their own life (Ahmed, 2024). Studies have found that students who develop self-determination skills during secondary school are more likely to experience successful outcomes after graduation, including improved employment and community participation (Davis et al., 2022). For educators, this means that transition planning should focus not only on academic preparation but also on helping students develop the confidence and skills to navigate adult systems. Instruction that promotes decision making, goal setting, and self-advocacy can significantly influence how successfully students transition to adulthood (David et al.).

1.2 Legal Foundations: Transition Requirements Under IDEA

The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** is a federal law that ensures students with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). This law requires schools to provide special education and related services that are specifically designed to address the unique needs of each student with a disability (The Illinois Center for Transition Work [ICTW], 2023). In addition to supporting academic development, IDEA emphasizes preparing students for life beyond school, including further education, employment, and independent living.

The law also establishes important protections to safeguard the rights of students with disabilities and their families throughout the educational process (ICTW).

Although Section 1.1 provided a general definition of transition planning within the context of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), IDEA provides a formal legal definition of transition services. According to IDEA, transition services are defined as a results-oriented process designed to improve the academic and functional achievement of a student with a disability in order to support the student's movement from school to post-school activities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; 34 C.F.R. § 300.43). These activities may include postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated or supported employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or participation in the community. The law also specifies that transition services must be individualized and based on the student's unique needs while taking into account the student's strengths, preferences, and interests (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

IDEA further states that transition services should include several key components that support preparation for adulthood. These services may involve instruction, related services, and opportunities for community experiences. Transition planning must also address the development of employment goals and other objectives related to adult living (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). When appropriate, services may include instruction in daily living skills and the use of functional vocational evaluations to help identify a student's strengths and potential career pathways. IDEA also clarifies that transition services may be provided as special education when they involve specially designed instruction, or as related services when they are necessary for a student to benefit from special education (Individuals with Disabilities Education).

IDEA requires that students with disabilities begin formal transition planning as they approach adulthood. Specifically, IDEA mandates that by age 16, a student's IEP must include a postsecondary transition plan that outlines goals for life after high school and is reviewed and updated each year (Marshall, n.d.). Some states begin this process even earlier, starting transition planning at age 14 to allow additional time for preparation. The purpose of this requirement is to help students and their families begin considering future pathways, such as education, employment, and independent living, while still in high school. Through this planning process, the high school experience is intentionally designed to help students build the skills, supports, and connections necessary to reach their long-term goals (Marshall).

Additionally, as students approach adulthood, an important change occurs in the IEP process as the parental rights are transferred. When students turn legal age of majority, which is 18 in most states, they are legally considered adults and gain the authority to make their own educational decisions (ICTW). Under IDEA, schools are required to inform both the student and the parents at least one year before the student's 18th birthday that these rights will transfer to the student (ICTW). Once the student turns 18, the rights previously held by parents related to special education services transfer to the student unless other legal arrangements, such as guardianship, have been established. This means that students themselves have the authority to make final decisions regarding their education, including participation in the IEP process and consent for services. Preparing students and families for this transition is an important part of the planning process, as it encourages students to develop self-advocacy skills and take an active role in decisions about their education and future goals (ICTW).

Additional Federal Laws Important to Transition

Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Another important law that supports individuals with disabilities is the **Rehabilitation Act of 1973**, particularly **Section 504**. This law was one of the first federal laws to protect the rights of people with disabilities by requiring equal access and prohibiting discrimination in programs and services that receive federal funding (ICTW, 2023). Section 504 requires institutions, including public schools, to provide reasonable accommodations so that qualified individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in educational programs and other activities. As a result, students who do not qualify for special education services under IDEA may still receive accommodations through a 504 plan while in school (ICTW). As students transition from high school to college, the legal framework changes. Colleges and universities are also required to comply with disability laws, including Section 504 and the **Americans with Disabilities Act**, but they do not operate under the same special education requirements used in K–12 schools. Students who previously had an IEP or a 504 plan can provide these documents to their college's disability services office when requesting accommodations. While colleges are not required to follow the accommodations listed in these documents exactly, they use the information to understand the student's needs and determine appropriate accommodations within the college setting. Disability services staff work with students to identify supports that allow them to access coursework and campus resources while maintaining the expectations of postsecondary education (ICTW).

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014

Another important law that supports transition planning and employment outcomes for students with disabilities is the **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014**. This federal legislation focuses on improving

opportunities for individuals with disabilities to successfully enter the workforce. WIOA requires that state and federal vocational rehabilitation systems allocate funding to help prepare students with disabilities for employment before they leave high school (ICTW, 2023). As part of this effort, state vocational rehabilitation agencies work in partnership with schools to provide pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) to students with disabilities who are eligible or may potentially become eligible for vocational rehabilitation services (ICTW).

Under WIOA, vocational rehabilitation counselors and educators collaborate to provide students with five key pre-employment transition services (ICTW, 2023). These services include job exploration counseling, which helps students learn about different career paths and employment opportunities. Students also participate in work-based learning experiences, such as internships, job shadowing, or part-time employment that allow them to gain real-world workplace experience. In addition, students receive counseling on opportunities for enrollment in postsecondary education or comprehensive transition programs, which helps them explore options for continued education or training after high school (ICTW). WIOA also requires workplace readiness training, which focuses on developing important skills such as communication, teamwork, and independent living. Finally, students receive instruction in self-advocacy, helping them understand their strengths, communicate their needs, and actively participate in decisions about their education, employment, and future goals (ICTW).

1.3 Components of a High-Quality Transition IEP

A high-quality transition IEP is designed to prepare students with disabilities for life after high school by aligning educational experiences with meaningful postsecondary goals. Effective transition planning is comprehensive,

individualized, and continuously updated to reflect a student's evolving interests, strengths, and needs. Several essential components work together to ensure that a transition IEP supports successful outcomes in employment, education, and independent living (The Illinois Center for Transition and Work [ICTW], 2023).

Age-Appropriate Transition Assessments

A key foundation of a high-quality transition IEP is the use of age-appropriate transition assessments. These assessments involve an ongoing process of collecting information about a student's strengths, interests, preferences, and abilities as they relate to future educational, employment, and independent living environments (ICTW, 2023). Transition assessments may examine areas such as career interests, daily living skills, academic abilities, and social or personal development. The information gathered through these assessments helps guide the transition planning process and ensures that goals and services are aligned with the student's individual needs. Because students' interests and goals may change over time, transition assessments should be conducted regularly and updated at least once each year (ICTW). The transition IEP should clearly document the focus area of each assessment, the type of assessment used, the individual or agency responsible for administering it, and the date it was completed. This documentation helps ensure that transition planning is data informed and responsive to the student's development (ICTW). We will discuss specific assessments and their purposes in section 2.

Measurable Postsecondary Goals

Another critical component of a high-quality transition IEP is the development of measurable postsecondary goals. These goals describe what the student intends to achieve after graduating from high school and provide direction for the student's educational program; postsecondary goals typically address several key

areas, including employment, postsecondary education, training, and independent living (ICTW). For example, a student may identify a goal of obtaining competitive employment in a particular career field, enrolling in a community college or university, completing vocational or technical training, or developing the skills necessary for independent living. Clearly defined postsecondary goals provide a framework for selecting appropriate courses, services, and learning experiences that support the student's transition to adulthood (ICTW, 2023).

Postsecondary Goal Examples:

- **Employment Goal:** Within one year of graduating from high school, the student will obtain part-time competitive employment (at least 15 hours per week) in the culinary field, such as a position as a line cook or food preparation worker in a restaurant.
- **Education Goal:** Within six months from graduation, the student will enroll in a community college culinary arts certificate program and complete the required coursework to earn a culinary arts certificate.
- **Independent Living Goal:** Within one year after exiting high school, the student will live in a supported apartment setting and independently manage daily living tasks, including budgeting monthly expenses, using public transportation, and preparing at least three meals per week.

Course of Study

The course of study outlines the sequence of classes and educational experiences a student will complete during high school in order to work toward their postsecondary goals (ICTW, 2023). This component typically includes academic courses, career and technical education (CTE) opportunities, and other learning experiences that align with the student's career interests and long-term plans. The course of study should function as a multi-year educational roadmap that guides

the student's progress through high school. Ideally, this plan is developed early in the student's high school career and is reviewed and adjusted as needed. By aligning coursework with postsecondary goals, educators can help ensure that students gain the knowledge and skills needed for further education, employment, or independent living (ICTW).

Coordinated Set of Transition Services and Activities

Transition IEPs must also include a coordinated set of services and activities designed to help students develop the skills necessary for adult life. These services are individualized based on the student's strengths, preferences, and interests and may involve multiple types of support (ICTW, 2023). Instructional activities may include tutoring, skills training, preparation for college entrance exams, or instruction in the use of accommodations. Related services may involve supports such as transportation, assistive technology, or other services that enable students to participate fully in their educational program. Community experiences are also an important part of transition planning and may include job shadowing, work-based learning experiences, or visits to postsecondary education settings (ICTW).

Transition services may further include activities focused on career planning and the development of employment goals, such as guidance counseling, participation in pre-employment transition services, or assistance with adult benefits planning (ICTW, 2023). When appropriate, transition planning may also address the development of daily living skills such as financial management, self-care, or healthcare management. In addition, schools should provide opportunities for students to explore career and technical education programs available within the school district and in postsecondary settings (ICTW).

Annual IEP Goals Connected to Transition Outcomes

Annual IEP goals play an important role in supporting the student's progress toward long-term transition objectives. These goals should be updated each year and directly linked to the student's measurable postsecondary goals. By aligning annual objectives with future outcomes, educators can ensure students are developing the skills necessary to achieve their desired paths after graduation (ICTW, 2023). For instance, if a student's postsecondary goal is to obtain part-time employment after graduation, an annual IEP goal might focus on developing workplace communication skills, completing job applications, or participating in work-based learning experiences. This alignment helps ensure that each year of the student's education contributes meaningfully to long-term transition success (ICTW, 2023).

Annual Goals Related to Transition Outcome Examples:

- **Employment Skill Development:** By the end of the IEP year, the student will demonstrate appropriate workplace communication skills by greeting supervisors and coworkers, asking for clarification when needed, and responding appropriately to feedback in a simulated or community-based work setting in 4 out of 5 observed opportunities, as measured by teacher and job coach observation logs.
- **Postsecondary Education Preparation:** By the end of the IEP year, the student will independently complete three postsecondary education preparation tasks, including researching at least two community college programs, completing one mock college application, and developing a list of required admission steps, with no more than one prompt per task, as measured by a transition planning checklist.
- **Independent Living Skill Development:** By the end of the IEP year, the student will demonstrate the ability to create and follow a simple weekly

budget, including tracking income and expenses and identifying necessary purchases, with 80 percent accuracy across four consecutive weeks, as measured by teacher review of budgeting worksheets.

Linkages to After-Graduation Supports and Services

Finally, a high-quality transition IEP identifies important supports and services that students may need after leaving high school. These linkages help ensure continuity of support as students transition into adulthood (ICTW, 2023). The transition plan may connect students and their families with agencies, organizations, and community resources that provide services related to employment, education, or independent living. Examples of these supports may include state vocational rehabilitation services, disability support services in postsecondary institutions, or programs that provide financial assistance and benefits (ICTW). These resources should also be documented in the student's Summary of Performance, which is provided when the student exits the school system. Establishing these connections prior to graduation helps students and families navigate available supports and increases the likelihood of successful adult outcomes (ICTW).

1.4 Members of the Transition IEP Team

Transition planning is most effective when it involves collaboration among several individuals who support the student's educational and post-school goals. The transition IEP team typically includes the student, parents or guardians, school staff, and in some cases outside agencies or community service providers. While some members are required participants, others may be invited depending on the student's needs and preferences. Additional individuals may also attend at the request of the student, family, or school to provide relevant expertise and support (ICTW, 2023).

The Student

Students are the central members of the transition IEP team because transition planning focuses on preparing them for adult life. IDEA requires that the student be invited to the meeting whenever transition services are discussed (ICTW, 2023). Students are uniquely positioned to provide valuable insight into their strengths, challenges, interests, and goals. Their perspective helps the IEP team better understand what supports and services are needed to help them succeed both in school and after graduation. Students are encouraged to actively participate in their IEP and transition planning meetings. This participation may involve sharing their interests, discussing their future goals, and contributing to decisions about the supports and services they need (ICTW). By clearly communicating their preferences and aspirations, students help the IEP team develop plans that align with their personal goals for education, employment, and independent living. Students are also encouraged to practice self-advocacy by speaking up during meetings, asking questions when they need clarification, and explaining what strategies or accommodations help them succeed in school (ICTW). Students are encouraged to describe their strengths and explain how their disability affects learning or daily activities. Students can share information about their academic experiences and participation in community activities, while also describing any supports that help them be successful (ICTW).

Parents or Guardians

Parents and guardians play an important role in the transition IEP process by advocating for their child's best interests and working in partnership with the school. As members of the IEP team, parents and school staff collaborate to identify the student's strengths, needs, and goals for the future. Parents provide valuable insight into their child's learning styles, interests, and experiences outside of school, which helps the team create a transition plan that supports the

student's success in education, employment, and community life (ICTW, 2023). Parents also support the transition planning process by sharing information, asking questions, and helping their child prepare for adult life. They can encourage their child to participate in IEP meetings, express their goals and preferences, and develop self-advocacy skills. In addition, parents may help their child explore postsecondary opportunities and connect with community resources or services that will support their goals after graduation. By actively participating in transition planning and reinforcing goals at home, parents help ensure that the student is prepared for life beyond high school (ICTW).

School Staff

Several school-based professionals typically participate in transition planning. The special education teacher or case manager often coordinates the IEP process and helps ensure that transition goals, services, and assessments are aligned with the student's postsecondary plans. General education teachers contribute insight into the student's progress in academic classes and help connect instruction to future education or career pathways. School administrators, such as principals or special education directors, ensure that appropriate resources and supports are available to implement the transition plan (ICTW, 2023). Other school staff may also be involved. Guidance counselors assist students with course planning, postsecondary education exploration, and college or financial aid applications. Vocational coordinators or transition specialists help arrange work-based learning experiences, job exploration activities, and workplace readiness training. Additionally, related service providers such as school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, social workers, occupational therapists, and physical therapists may help identify supports that will assist students in reaching their postsecondary goals (ICTW).

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors

Vocational rehabilitation counselors may also participate in transition planning. These professionals provide information about employment services and can help determine a student's eligibility for vocational rehabilitation programs (ICTW, 2023). They often assist students with career exploration, job placement support, and development of an Individualized Plan for Employment. Collaboration between schools and vocational rehabilitation counselors helps ensure that students have access to services that support employment and independence after graduation (ICTW).

Community Service Providers

In some cases, community agencies and service providers may be invited to participate in transition planning meetings. These organizations can provide information about services that support students after they leave high school, such as employment training programs, independent living supports, or disability services at postsecondary institutions (ICTW, 2023). Community providers may also help families understand eligibility requirements and connect them with resources that support the student's transition goals. Including these partners in the planning process helps create continuity of support as students move from school into adult services and community life (ICTW).

Together, the transition IEP team works collaboratively to develop and implement a plan that prepares the student for life after high school. By combining the perspectives of the student, family, educators, and community partners, the team can create a coordinated approach that supports successful outcomes in education, employment, and independent living.

1.5 Summary of Performance (SOP)

As students with disabilities prepare to exit high school, schools are required to provide a Summary of Performance (SOP). This document must be given to the student before graduation with a regular diploma or when the student ages out of special education services, typically during the year the student turns 22. The purpose of the SOP is to summarize the student's academic achievement, functional performance, and transition needs at the time of leaving the school system (ICTW, 2023). The document should be written in clear and meaningful language so that the student can understand it and use it to support future plans. The Summary of Performance provides important information that can help students access postsecondary education, employment, and community services. Students may share the document with college disability services offices, vocational rehabilitation agencies, employment specialists, or other support providers to help explain their disability, strengths, and support needs. In this way, the SOP serves as a profile that helps others understand how to best support students as they transition into adult environments (ICTW).

A high-quality SOP includes several key components. It describes the student's postsecondary goals related to employment, education or training, and independent living. It also summarizes the student's academic achievement, including skills in areas such as reading, mathematics, and other learning-related abilities. In addition, the document outlines the student's functional performance, which may include information about social interactions, self-care skills, mobility, safety awareness, and executive functioning abilities (ICTW, 2023). The SOP should also include recommended supports that may help the student succeed in postsecondary settings. These supports may involve accommodations, assistive technology, modifications, or strategies that have been effective during the student's education. Finally, the document provides next steps and recommendations to help students move toward their goals, such as meeting with

a college disability services coordinator, connecting with vocational rehabilitation services, or exploring employment or training opportunities. Ideally, the Summary of Performance is reviewed with students during their final transition planning meeting so that they understand how to use the document to advocate for their needs after leaving high school (ICTW).

Section 1 Conclusion

Transition planning is a comprehensive, collaborative, and legally grounded process that plays a vital role in preparing students with disabilities for adult life. From understanding its purpose and legal foundations to implementing high-quality IEP components and engaging key team members, effective transition planning requires intentional alignment between students' recurrent educational experiences and their future goals. By focusing on individualized planning, skill development, and coordinated supports, educators can help bridge the gap between school and postsecondary success. While this section has established the foundational elements of transition planning, effective implementation also depends on the use of meaningful data to guide decisions. The next section will explore specific assessments used in transition IEPs and how data-driven transition planning can support the development of individualized, measurable, and actionable goals for students.

Section 1 Key Terms

Accommodations - Adjustments or supports provided to help students with disabilities access instruction, assessments, or environments without changing the learning expectations.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) - A federal law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities and ensures equal access to public services, including postsecondary education.

Annual IEP Goals - Measurable, short-term objectives included in an Individualized Education Program that support progress toward long-term transition outcomes.

Community-Based Instruction - Instruction that takes place in real-world settings to help students develop practical skills for independent living, employment, and community participation.

Course of Study - A multi-year plan of academic and experiential coursework that aligns with a student's postsecondary goals.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) - A legal right under federal law that ensures students with disabilities receive individualized education services at no cost to families.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) - A legally required document that outlines a student's educational goals, services, accommodations, and transition plan.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) - A federal law that governs special education services and requires transition planning for students with disabilities.

Independent Living - The ability to manage daily life tasks, such as personal care, finances, and transportation, with or without supports.

Measurable Postsecondary Goals - Clearly defined goals that describe what a student plans to achieve after high school in areas such as education, employment, and independent living.

Postsecondary Education - Education or training that occurs after high school, including college, vocational programs, and certification programs.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) - Services provided under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act that help students with disabilities prepare for employment.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) - A federal law that ensures individuals with disabilities have equal access to programs and services that receive federal funding.

Related Services - Support services, such as transportation or therapy, that help a student benefit from special education.

Self-Advocacy - The ability of students to understand and communicate their needs, preferences, and rights.

Self-Determination - The ability to make choices, set goals, and take responsibility for one's own life and decisions.

Summary of Performance (SOP) - A document provided to students when they exit high school that summarizes their academic achievement, functional performance, and recommended supports.

Transition IEP - The portion of an Individualized Education Program that focuses on preparing a student for postsecondary life through goals and coordinated services.

Transition Planning - A student-centered, ongoing process that prepares students with disabilities for life after high school, including education, employment, and independent living.

Transition Services - A coordinated set of activities defined by federal law that support a student's movement from school to post-school outcomes.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) - A system of services that helps individuals with disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain employment.

Work-Based Learning - Structured experiences such as internships, job shadowing, or employment that allow students to develop job skills in real-world settings.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) - A federal law that supports workforce development and requires services to help students with disabilities prepare for employment.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does your school currently prepare students with disabilities for life beyond high school? Where do you see strengths, and where are there gaps?
2. Think about students you have worked with who are approaching adulthood. How effectively did their transition plans reflect their individual strengths, preferences, and goals?
3. Consider the concept of “future-ready” outcomes. What skills do you believe are most critical for students with disabilities to succeed in today’s world, and how are those skills currently addressed in your classroom or program?
4. In your experience, how involved are students in their own transition planning? What strategies could increase meaningful student participation in the process?
5. After reviewing this section, what is one specific change you could make in your practice or program to better support transition planning for students with disabilities?

Section 1 Activities

1. **IEP Transition Audit:** Review one or more recent IEPs to evaluate the quality and alignment of transition components, including postsecondary goals and services.
2. **Rewrite a Postsecondary Goal:** Select an existing postsecondary goal from an IEP and revise it to make it more specific, measurable, and student-centered.
3. **Community Resource Exploration:** Research local community agencies, vocational programs, or services that support students with disabilities after graduation.
4. **Transition Resource Compilation:** Create a list or folder of tools, templates, and resources that support effective transition planning.
5. **Immediate Practice Change:** Identify one specific change you can implement this week to improve transition planning or student readiness and outline how you will do it.

Section 2: Assessment and Data-Driven Transition Planning

Effective transition planning is grounded in meaningful, data-driven decision making. Assessments provide the critical information needed to understand a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs, allowing educators to design individualized plans that support successful postsecondary outcomes. This section explores the role of assessment in transition planning, the different types of assessments used, and how data is collected across academic, vocational, and functional domains. It also highlights commonly used formal and informal

assessment tools, along with strategies for interpreting data and promoting student voice through person-centered planning. Together, these elements support a comprehensive approach to developing transition IEPs that are both compliant and responsive to each student's unique goals.

2.1 The Role of Assessment in Transition Planning

Assessment plays a critical role in developing effective transition plans for students with disabilities. High-quality, age-appropriate transition assessments provide the foundation for identifying a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs, all of which are essential for meaningful planning. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition services must be based on assessment data, ensuring that decisions about goals and services are grounded in an accurate understanding of the student (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). To build a comprehensive picture of the student, IEP teams should use a variety of assessment methods. These may include formal tools such as standardized assessments, as well as informal approaches like interviews, observations, questionnaires, and performance-based tasks. Gathering information from multiple sources and across different settings allows educators to better understand how the student functions in academic, social, and real-world environments. This ongoing process ensures that transition planning remains responsive to the student's development and changing goals over time (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Assessment data directly informs key components of the transition IEP. It supports the development of meaningful and measurable postsecondary goals in areas such as education, employment, and independent living (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). In addition, assessment results guide the selection of appropriate transition services and activities, helping to ensure that instruction,

community experiences, and supports are aligned with the student's future plans. By using a data-driven approach, educators can create individualized transition plans that not only meet legal requirements but also prepare students for successful outcomes after high school (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

2.2 Types of Assessments

A variety of assessments are used to guide the transition planning process and ensure that decisions are aligned with a student's postsecondary goals. Transition assessments involve the ongoing collection of information about a student's strengths, needs, preferences, and interests. This information is used by the IEP team to develop measurable postsecondary goals and determine the services and supports necessary to help the student achieve those goals (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026).

Formal and Informal Assessments

To create a comprehensive picture of the student, IEP teams should use a combination of formal and informal assessments.

- **Formal assessments:** These assessments are normed and standardized, meaning that a student's performance is compared to the performance of a larger group of students of the same age or grade level across the country, providing a benchmark to understand how an individual student's performance compares to peers (Ten Sigma, 2024). These assessments are designed to produce reliable and consistent results, often taking into account factors such as the standard error of measurement, which reflects the degree of variation that may occur in a student's score. Common examples of formal transition assessments include tools such as the Transition Planning Inventory (TPI), the Enderle-Severson Transition Rating

Scale (ESTR), and various assessments from Brigance (Ten Sigma). To meet legal standards for transition assessment established by federal district courts, at least one assessment included in a student's transition assessment battery must have strong supporting validity. This ensures that transition planning is based on reliable and appropriate data (ICTW, 2023).

- **Informal assessments:** Informal assessments involve gathering information through observations, interviews, work samples, classroom performance, and records. These methods provide valuable context about how a student performs in real-world and educational settings (El Dorado County Charter SELPA). Common examples of informal assessments include interest inventories, interviews, and reviews of academic or behavioral records (Ten Sigma, 2024).

Using both types of assessments allows educators to collect diverse data and better understand the student's abilities and needs.

Areas of Assessment

Transition assessments typically focus on three key areas: education and training, employment, and independent living or personal development (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). By gathering data across these areas, educators can develop a well-rounded understanding of the student's current performance and future needs.

- **Education and Training Assessments** examine academic strengths, communication skills, and learning needs (El Dorado County Charter SELPA). These assessments help determine appropriate instruction, guide decisions about postsecondary education or training programs, and monitor student progress over time.

- **Employment Assessments** focus on a student's interests, aptitudes, and work-related values (El Dorado County Charter SELPA). These tools provide insight into potential career pathways and help identify the skills needed for future employment.
- **Independent Living or Personal Assessments** evaluate social, behavioral, and daily living skills. They help identify a student's ability to function independently, including self-advocacy, decision making, and life skills necessary for adulthood (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Characteristics of Effective Transition Assessments

High-quality transition assessments should be carefully selected to ensure they are appropriate and meaningful for each student. Effective assessments are age appropriate, aligned with the student's postsecondary goals, and sensitive to cultural and communication differences. They should also be nondiscriminatory, accessible, and adaptable to meet the needs of students with disabilities (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). When necessary, assessments should be available in multiple formats, including verbal and nonverbal options, to ensure that all students can demonstrate their abilities accurately (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

2.3 Commonly Used Formal Transition Assessments

Transition Planning Inventory (TPI-3)

The Transition Planning Inventory–Third Edition (TPI-3) is one example of a formal transition assessment used with students ages 14 to 21 to support the development of transition components within the IEP. It is used for identifying and planning for the comprehensive transitional needs of students. It is designed to

help educators systematically gather information aligned to IDEA transition requirements, including a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs (Pro-Ed, 2026). The TPI-3 collects input from multiple sources, including the student, family members, and school staff, using rating scales and open-ended questions. This multi-informant approach allows the IEP team to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the student's current functioning and future goals. In practice, tools like the TPI-3 may be used either as a primary transition assessment or alongside other formal and informal measures to inform planning. The results are intended to support the identification of transition priorities and the development of appropriate postsecondary goals and services (Pro-Ed).

The assessment also includes components that help organize and apply the information collected. For example, summary and profile forms can be used to compile results and identify areas where additional assessment may be needed. Modified versions of the assessment are available for students with more significant support needs, allowing for greater accessibility. In addition, some formats include tools that support documentation of student needs and goals as they prepare to exit high school (Pro-Ed, 2026). In educational settings, assessments like the TPI-3 are most effective when used as part of a broader, data-driven transition planning process. Rather than serving as a standalone solution, they contribute to a larger body of evidence that helps educators design individualized, meaningful transition plans that align with each student's long-term outcomes (Pro-Ed).

Transition Assessment and Goal Generator (TAGG)

The Transition Assessment and Goal Generator (TAGG) is an online transition assessment designed for students with mild to moderate disabilities. It focuses on evaluating non-academic behaviors that are important for success in postsecondary education and employment (ICTW, 2023). The TAGG includes three

versions - professional, student, and family - each consisting of 34 items, allowing input from multiple perspectives. The assessment measures key areas related to transition readiness, including self-awareness, persistence, goal setting, social interactions, employment skills, student involvement in the IEP process, and use of support systems. These areas help provide a broader understanding of the skills students need beyond academics to succeed after high school (ICTW). Results from the TAGG generate a summary of the student's current performance, along with identified strengths, needs, and suggested transition-related IEP goals. Because of its strong research base and focus on measurable outcomes, it is recommended that the TAGG be completed annually to monitor student progress and adjust transition planning as needed (ICTW).

Brigance Transition Skills Inventory (TSI)

The Brigance Transition Skills Inventory (TSI) is a formal, criterion-referenced assessment designed for middle and high school students to support transition planning. It includes more than 100 assessments that measure a student's present levels of performance across four key areas: academic skills, postsecondary opportunities, independent living, and community participation (Texas Education Agency, 2025). The TSI is used to help educators identify strengths and areas of need, which can then inform the development of transition goals and objectives within the IEP. Because it is criterion-referenced, the assessment focuses on a student's individual skill development rather than comparing performance to peers. It can also be used over time to monitor progress toward transition goals and document growth in important life and career readiness skills (Texas Education Agency).

Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales

The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales is a formal assessment used for all ages, and also commonly used in transition planning to evaluate a student's adaptive behavior and social skills. It measures key areas such as communication, daily living skills, and socialization, which are critical for independence and success in postsecondary environments (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). For transition purposes, this assessment is typically used with students in grades 6 through 12 and is particularly valuable for students who require more intensive support in daily living and functional skill development. The results help IEP teams better understand a student's ability to manage everyday tasks and interact effectively with others, which can inform transition goals related to independent living and community participation (El Dorado County Charter SELPA). Because of its focus on real-world functioning, the Vineland is especially useful for identifying support needs and planning appropriate services for students with more significant disabilities as they prepare for adulthood (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

OASIS-3 Interest Schedule

The OASIS-3 Interest Schedule is a formal transition assessment used to help identify a student's career interests and work preferences. Designed for students in grades 8 through adulthood, this assessment focuses on identifying interests aligned with 12 vocational factors, providing insight into potential career pathways (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). The results of the OASIS-3 are used to support career exploration and help educators and IEP teams identify appropriate career clusters that align with a student's interests. This information can then be used to guide the development of postsecondary employment goals and inform transition services, such as coursework, work-based learning experiences, and career and technical education opportunities (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Index of Learning Styles Questionnaire (ILS)

The Index of Learning Styles (ILS) is used to identify how students prefer to learn and process information. It is based on a learning style model developed by Richard Felder and Linda Silverman and measures preferences across four dimensions: active versus reflective, sensing versus intuitive, visual versus verbal, and sequential versus global (Andrews University, 2026). The results of the ILS provide insight into a student's learning preferences, highlighting both strengths and potential challenges in academic settings. For example, some students may learn best through hands-on activities, while others may prefer reflection or visual supports. Understanding these preferences can help educators tailor instruction, supports, and learning strategies to better meet individual student needs. In the context of transition planning, the ILS can help inform decisions about instructional approaches, accommodations, and learning environments that will support the student's success in postsecondary education or training programs (Andrews University).

These formal assessments represent just a few examples of commonly used formal tools across the areas of academic, functional, and vocational skills. While they illustrate how assessment data can support transition planning, there are many additional assessments that schools may use depending on the needs of the student, available resources, and district practices.

2.4 Commonly Used Informal Assessments

Interest Inventories

Interest inventories are a type of informal assessment used in transition planning to help identify a student's preferences, likes and dislikes, and favorite activities. These tools also explore personal qualities and tendencies, allowing educators to

better understand what motivates and engages the student. By connecting this information to potential career paths, community opportunities, and independent living options, interest inventories help students begin to see how their interests relate to life after high school (Maryland Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2021). In addition to informing transition planning, interest inventories support the development of self-knowledge. As students reflect on their interests and preferences, they gain a clearer understanding of their strengths and potential pathways. Because of this, interest inventories are often used as an early step in the transition planning process, helping to guide the development of meaningful and individualized postsecondary goals (Maryland Department of Education).

These tools are often used early in transition planning to build self-awareness and support the development of meaningful postsecondary goals (Maryland Department of Education, Special Education Division, 2021). Some commonly used interest inventories include (Maryland Department of Education):

- **O*NET Interest Profiler (My Next Move):** Developed by the U.S. Department of Labor, this free, web-based tool is designed for students ages 14 to 21. It includes 60 items that measure interests based on the RIASEC model: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. The results help students identify types of work activities and careers that align with their interests.
- **RIASEC Inventory:** This assessment is typically used with high school students and is based on John Holland's RIASEC framework as well. Holland's theory groups careers and interests into six categories: Realistic (hands-on, practical work), Investigative (analytical and problem-solving tasks), Artistic (creative expression), Social (helping and teaching others), Enterprising (leading, persuading, or managing), and Conventional

(organizing and working with data). Students respond to a list of activities by indicating their preferences, and results are categorized into these six areas to identify top career-related interests.

- **Reading-Free Vocational Interest Inventory (RFVII-3):** This nonverbal assessment uses images of individuals engaged in different occupations to measure vocational interests. It is especially useful for students with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, or those who prefer visual formats, as it does not require reading or writing. Results provide a detailed report linking student interests to careers and training options.

These inventories provide practical ways for students to explore their interests and begin connecting them to future education, employment, and independent living opportunities. When used alongside other assessments, they support more personalized and effective transition planning by helping students better understand themselves and their potential pathways (Maryland Department of Education).

In addition to surveys and structured tools, many informal assessments used in transition planning occur through everyday interactions and classroom experiences. These may include teacher observations, student interviews, work samples, classroom performance, and discussions with families or other service providers. For example, observing how students complete tasks, interact with peers, or manage responsibilities in different settings can provide valuable insight into their strengths and support needs. Reviewing assignments, projects, or participation in work-based learning experiences can also help identify skill development and areas for growth. These types of informal assessments provide real-world, contextual information that complements more structured tools and helps the IEP team develop a more complete and individualized understanding of the student.

2.5 Interpreting Assessment Data for Goal Development

Once transition assessments have been completed, the IEP team must analyze and interpret the results to ensure they are meaningful and useful for planning. It is also important that students and their families understand the assessment findings so they can actively participate in decision making. The interpretation process focuses on identifying the student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs, which serve as the foundation for transition planning (Lo, 2024b). The IEP team uses this data collaboratively to develop measurable postsecondary goals and determine appropriate next steps for the student. For example, assessment results may help the team decide whether a student should pursue postsecondary education, vocational training, or a combination of both (Lo). The data can also highlight areas where the student may need additional instruction or support, such as strengthening academic skills, developing workplace behaviors, or building independent living skills. Ultimately, interpreting assessment data ensures that transition planning is individualized and aligned with the student's future goals. (Lo).

2.6 Promoting Student Voice Through Person-Centered Planning

Promoting student voice is a critical component of effective transition planning. A person-centered, or person-driven, approach places students at the center of the planning process, emphasizing their goals, preferences, strengths, and aspirations rather than focusing solely on services or deficits. This approach encourages students to actively participate as decision-makers in their own transition planning, helping them develop self-determination, confidence, and ownership over their future (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). Person-centered planning begins by helping students identify their strengths, interests, and long-term goals, while also recognizing potential barriers and the supports needed to

overcome them. This process is collaborative and involves input from family members, educators, and other professionals, but it prioritizes the student's voice in all decisions. By engaging students in meaningful discussions about their future, IEP teams can create more individualized and relevant transition plans that align with the students' visions for their lives (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

One way to promote student voice is through student-led IEP planning, where students take an active role in preparing for and participating in their IEP meetings (El Dorado County Charter SELPA). This may include sharing their interests, presenting examples of their work, or communicating their goals using a variety of formats such as presentations, visuals, or videos. Educators can support this process by teaching students about the purpose and components of the IEP, helping them build self-advocacy skills, and providing opportunities to practice participating in meetings. Creating opportunities for students to lead or actively contribute to their IEP meetings not only supports more personalized planning but also prepares them for adult life, where they will need to advocate for themselves in educational, employment, and community settings (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Section 2 Conclusion

Assessment is a foundational component of high-quality transition planning, ensuring that decisions about goals, services, and supports are informed by accurate and comprehensive data. By using a combination of formal and informal assessments, educators can develop a well-rounded understanding of each student and create transition plans that are individualized, meaningful, and aligned with future aspirations. Interpreting this data effectively and incorporating student voice through person-centered practices further strengthens the transition process, empowering students to take an active role in shaping their

futures. While this section has focused on assessment and data-driven planning, successful transition outcomes also depend on how plans are put into action. The next section will explore collaboration, implementation, and future-ready transition practices that support students as they move from school to adult life.

Section 2 Key Terms

Adaptive Behavior - The collection of conceptual, social, and practical skills that individuals use to function in daily life.

Assessment Battery - A group of multiple assessments used together to provide a comprehensive understanding of a student's abilities, needs, and preferences.

Career Interest Inventory - A tool used to identify a student's preferences and interests related to potential career paths.

Criterion-Referenced Assessment - An assessment that measures a student's performance against specific skills or standards rather than comparing them to peers.

Data-Driven Decision Making - The process of using assessment results and evidence to guide instructional planning, goal development, and service selection.

Employment Assessment - An evaluation that identifies a student's work-related interests, strengths, and readiness for employment.

Functional Skills Assessment - An evaluation of practical life skills such as communication, self-care, and daily living abilities needed for independence.

Informal Assessment - A non-standardized method of gathering information through observations, interviews, work samples, or classroom performance.

Informant Input - Information gathered from multiple individuals, such as students, families, and educators, to support a comprehensive understanding of a student.

Interest Inventory - A type of informal assessment that identifies a student's preferences, likes, and potential career interests.

Learning Preferences - The ways in which a student best receives, processes, and engages with information.

Norm-Referenced Assessment - An assessment that compares a student's performance to that of a larger, standardized group of peers.

Person-Centered Planning - An approach to planning that prioritizes the student's goals, preferences, strengths, and active participation in decision making.

Performance-Based Assessment - An assessment that requires students to demonstrate skills or knowledge through tasks or real-world activities.

Postsecondary Readiness Skills - The academic, behavioral, and practical skills needed to succeed in education, employment, and independent living after high school.

Rating Scale - An assessment tool that measures the frequency or level of specific behaviors or skills based on defined criteria.

Reliability - The consistency of an assessment's results when administered multiple times or by different evaluators.

Standard Error of Measurement - The degree of variation or potential error in a student's assessment score.

Standardized Assessment - A formal assessment administered and scored in a consistent manner to ensure comparability of results.

Validity - The extent to which an assessment accurately measures what it is intended to measure.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Think about recent students you worked with. What types of assessment data were used to inform their transition plans, and what may have been missing?
2. How effectively do you use both formal and informal assessments in your practice? Which type do you rely on more, and why?
3. How could you increase opportunities for students to actively contribute to the assessment process rather than being passive participants?
4. Reflect on collaboration in assessment. How do different team members contribute to gathering and interpreting data?
5. Reflect on a time when assessment data led to a meaningful change in a student's transition plan. What made that data particularly useful?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Assessment Inventory Audit:** Review all transition assessments currently used in your classroom or school and identify gaps across academic, vocational, and functional areas.
2. **Goal Alignment Review:** Take one student's assessment data and determine whether postsecondary goals clearly reflect the data collected.
3. **Team Data Discussion:** Share assessment data with a colleague or team member and discuss how it could better inform transition planning.

4. **Family Communication Tool:** Create a simple summary or guide to help families understand transition assessment results and their purpose.
5. **Student Interview Activity:** Conduct a structured interview with a student about interests, strengths, and future goals, and document how it informs planning.

Section 3: Preparing Students for the Future

Transition planning extends beyond the development of goals and services within the IEP to include preparing students for the real decisions and opportunities they will encounter after high school. As students move closer to adulthood, educators, families, and support professionals must work together to help them understand their options, build essential life skills, and navigate systems that support postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. This section explores key considerations in this process, including graduation pathways, student-centered planning, collaboration with community agencies, and the rights and responsibilities students will assume as they transition into adult environments. Additionally, this section will explore future planning considerations for students with extensive support needs (ESN).

3.1 Graduation Options for Students with IEPs

Graduation options for students with disabilities can vary widely by state, and it is important for educators and families to understand the choices available within their specific context. While the examples discussed below are drawn from Nevada, all states offer a range of diploma pathways that are designed to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. In general, these options fall into two broad categories: traditional diplomas, which typically end a student's

eligibility for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and nontraditional pathways, which may allow students to continue receiving transition services until they age out of eligibility at 22.

In Nevada, students may pursue a standard diploma, an alternative diploma, or an adjusted diploma.

- **Standard Diploma:** Earned by completing required coursework and assessments; typically signals the end of IDEA services.
- **Alternative Diploma:** A recognized high school diploma aligned to alternate academic standards; allows students to continue receiving transition services, including community-based instruction and employment preparation, through age 22.
- **Adjusted Diploma:** Designed for students who are unable to meet full credit requirements; reflects individualized learning goals and progress in areas such as independence and employability. Students often continue in transition programs focused on real-world skill development (Phillips, 2025).

Although the specific names and requirements of these diplomas differ across states, the broader goal remains the same: to provide pathways that align with each student's abilities, goals, and postsecondary plans. However, these options are not always clearly understood by students and families. When educators and IEP teams explain graduation pathways in clear, accessible language, they can help reframe these options as opportunities rather than limitations (Phillips). This approach allows families to celebrate student growth while also planning for the future.

3.2 Supporting Students in Planning for Their Futures

Successful transition to adult life is most likely when students with disabilities are actively involved in planning their own futures. Transition planning should empower students to make informed decisions about their education, employment, and independent living goals. To support this process, educators, families, IEP teams, and vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals should set high expectations, assist with career development and work-based learning opportunities, use person-centered approaches, address social and emotional needs, and provide structured support for decision-making (DE, 2020).

Setting High Expectations

High expectations play a critical role in student success. When students with disabilities are held to rigorous academic and career standards and provided access to general education curriculum and college- and career-ready opportunities, they are more likely to achieve positive postsecondary outcomes (DE, 2020). Conversely, low expectations can act as a barrier to success. Schools can promote better outcomes by fostering a culture of high expectations, aligning IEP goals with grade-level standards, and ensuring students receive the supports needed to succeed in challenging coursework (DE).

Career Development and Work-Based Learning (WBL)

Career development is an essential component of transition planning, helping students with disabilities build the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed for life after high school. In school settings, career development can take many forms, including career awareness activities and work-based learning (WBL) opportunities. Educators can support career awareness by integrating transition assessments and curriculum in ways that are age-appropriate and culturally responsive, while also making clear connections between academic content,

career skills, and real-world applications (Migliore et al., 2025). WBL is a particularly valuable strategy for preparing students with disabilities for employment. WBL provides structured opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience through activities such as internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and other workplace experiences aligned with their career interests. These experiences allow students to apply what they have learned in authentic settings and develop the practical skills needed for successful employment (Migliore et al.).

Participation in WBL is especially important because a lack of social and employment-related skills is often identified as a key barrier to postsecondary employment for students with disabilities (Migliore et al., 2025). Through WBL experiences, students can build critical skills such as communication, collaboration, time management, and organization. These skills are essential not only for obtaining a job, but also for maintaining and advancing in a career over time (Migliore et al.). Career development and WBL opportunities should take place in integrated, community-based settings whenever possible. Examples include job shadowing, mentorship, informational interviews, workplace tours, internships, service learning, and school-based enterprises. These experiences can be offered in both group and individualized formats and are particularly beneficial for students who are beginning to explore career pathways. By engaging in these activities, students gain exposure to different work environments and begin to understand expectations within the workforce (Migliore et al., 2025).

Despite their importance, students with disabilities may face barriers to accessing career development opportunities, including limited instructional time, restrictive school policies, and a lack of educator training in teaching employment-related skills. Addressing these barriers is critical to ensuring equitable access to meaningful experiences. When educators provide explicit instruction and intentional opportunities for skill development within WBL, students not only gain

workplace competencies but also strengthen their self-determination and confidence, which are essential for long-term success in both work and life (Migliore et al., 2025).

States Promoting WBL

When schools and education systems actively prioritize WBL, they reinforce the belief that all students are capable of working and succeeding in meaningful careers. A proactive approach ensures that students with disabilities have access to opportunities that build foundational workplace skills and prepare them for life after high school (Migliore et al., 2025). Across the United States, many states have taken steps to expand access to WBL. For example, a majority of states have established formal definitions of WBL within policy, and many allow students to earn high school credit for participating in these experiences (Migliore et al.). In addition, career exploration is often introduced as early as middle school, helping students begin to identify interests and career pathways early in their education. Some states also provide financial incentives to support WBL programs, further demonstrating a commitment to expanding these opportunities. Research highlights the positive impact of career-focused education and WBL. Students who participate in career and technical education (CTE) programs, which often include WBL experiences, have higher graduation rates than the national average. They are also just as likely as their peers to pursue and complete postsecondary degrees or certificates (Migliore et al., 2025). These findings emphasize that WBL not only supports career readiness but also contributes to overall academic success and long-term outcomes for students, including those with disabilities.

Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning focuses on individual students rather than their disabilities. This approach prioritizes the student's strengths, interests, preferences, and goals, and involves individuals who know the student well.

Planning should use clear, accessible language and emphasize the student's abilities and potential. By centering the student's voice and experiences, teams can develop more meaningful and individualized transition plans (DE, 2020).

Addressing Social and Emotional Needs

Social and emotional skills are essential for success in postsecondary education, employment, and community life. Students with strong communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills are better equipped to navigate adult environments (DE, 2020). Schools can support this development by incorporating social and emotional learning opportunities, such as role-playing, structured skill-building programs, and creating a positive, supportive school climate that builds on student strengths (DE).

Building Self-Determination and Decision-Making Skills

Developing self-determination is a key component of transition planning. Students need opportunities to practice skills such as goal setting, decision making, problem solving, and self-advocacy (DE, 2020). Actively involving students in their IEP meetings and helping them understand their plans supports this development. When students take ownership of their goals and learning, they are more likely to experience successful outcomes after high school (DE).

Supporting Informed Choice

Students should be supported in making informed choices about their futures. This includes decisions about employment goals, educational pathways, services, and supports (DE, 2020). VR counselors and educators play an important role in providing information, guidance, and resources to help students understand their options and follow through with decisions. Informed choice involves gathering

information, weighing options, and making decisions that align with personal goals (DE).

Family Involvement and Decision-Making Options

Family involvement remains an important part of the transition process, even as students approach adulthood. When students reach the age of majority, they typically gain the legal right to make their own decisions. However, families can continue to play a supportive role through options such as supported decision-making or power of attorney arrangements (DE, 2020). These approaches allow students to maintain autonomy while receiving guidance from trusted individuals, rather than relying on more restrictive options such as guardianship (DE).

3.3 Partnering With Community Agencies and Service Providers

Partnering with community agencies and employers is an essential component of effective transition planning. Students with disabilities often need supports that extend beyond the school setting, making collaboration with outside organizations critical for preparing them for adult life. Schools work with a range of partners, including vocational rehabilitation agencies, disability service organizations, healthcare providers, and postsecondary institutions, to ensure students have access to the services and resources needed for successful transitions to education, employment, and independent living (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). All states offer systems of support similar to those described, although the names of agencies may differ. One key support found nationwide is vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, which help students prepare for, obtain, and maintain employment. These services may include career counseling, job training, job placement assistance, and workplace supports such as job coaching. Another common support system includes developmental disability or long-term service agencies, which provide ongoing assistance for individuals with more significant

support needs. These services may include independent living supports, community participation programs, and assistance with daily living skills (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

In addition, many students benefit from connections to postsecondary disability services, which help ensure access to accommodations and supports in college or training programs. Community-based organizations and social service agencies may also provide resources related to housing, transportation, healthcare, and financial assistance (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). Together, these supports create a network that helps students transition more smoothly from school to adult life. Strong community partnerships enhance transition planning by creating a coordinated system of support. Collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations allows for a more comprehensive understanding of each student's strengths and needs, leading to more effective and individualized IEPs (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Support

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs support students with disabilities in developing the skills and education needed to achieve employment and economic independence. Through an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), VR outlines the specific services and supports students will receive to reach their career goals (United States Department of Education [ED], 2020). If postsecondary education or training is part of that plan, VR may provide financial assistance for a range of expenses, including tuition not covered by financial aid, vocational or technical training, advanced education programs, books, tools, and other training materials. VR may also fund disability-related supports such as personal assistants, interpreters, readers, or other educational support services (ED).

Before providing most financial support, VR requires students and counselors to first identify and use other available funding sources, a process known as seeking

“comparable benefits” (DE, 2020). This often includes applying for grants, such as Pell Grants through the FAFSA. However, students are not required to apply for merit-based scholarships or take out student loans. If a student does receive scholarships or other aid that reduces certain costs, VR will adjust its funding accordingly to avoid duplication (DE). Overall, VR works collaboratively with students to ensure they can access and complete education or training programs that align with their employment goals.

3.4 Rights and Responsibilities in Postsecondary Education

As students with disabilities transition to postsecondary education or training, it is important they understand their rights and responsibilities in this new setting. Being informed helps students access supports effectively and fully participate in their educational experience without unnecessary delays or barriers (DE, 2020). One of the most significant changes is that students are no longer entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) under IDEA once they graduate from high school with a standard diploma. This means that the comprehensive services and supports provided in K–12 settings do not automatically continue in college. Instead, postsecondary institutions operate under different laws, which we discussed in section 1, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibit discrimination based on disability (DE).

Under these laws, colleges and universities are required to provide reasonable accommodations, such as academic adjustments, auxiliary aids, and support services, to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to programs and activities. However, these institutions are not required to make changes that would fundamentally alter a program or create an undue financial or administrative burden (DE, 2020). Another key difference is that students must

take a more active role in accessing supports. In postsecondary settings, students are responsible for self-identifying as having a disability and requesting accommodations through the institution's disability services office. Colleges are not required to identify students or assess their needs unless the student initiates the request. While documents such as an IEP or 504 plan can be helpful in demonstrating past supports, they are typically not sufficient on their own, and additional documentation may be required (DE).

Because of these changes, transition planning should include preparing students to advocate for themselves, understand their rights, and navigate support systems independently. Educators, IEP teams, and VR counselors can support this process by helping students practice self-disclosure, understand documentation requirements, and build the skills needed to access accommodations in postsecondary environments (United States Department of Education, 2020).

Examples of VR Supports in Postsecondary Education

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies often partner with schools and postsecondary institutions to provide targeted supports that help students with disabilities succeed in college and training programs. These partnerships demonstrate how coordinated services can improve access, persistence, and outcomes for students transitioning to higher education (DE, 2020). One example is the development of Autism Support Programs through collaboration between VR agencies, secondary schools, and community colleges. In these programs, students with autism receive comprehensive supports while enrolled in college. Services may include faculty training to better support diverse learners, career guidance, instruction in self-advocacy, and ongoing communication among VR counselors, faculty, and families. Even after initial grant funding ends, VR agencies may continue these supports by dedicating staff to work directly with students

across multiple campuses (DE). These efforts help students transition successfully into college and, in some cases, continue on to four-year universities.

Another example is the implementation of Supported Education Programs in partnership with community colleges. These programs are designed to help transition-age students build the skills needed for college success. Supports may include tutoring, study skills instruction, and guidance on navigating college life. Many of these programs focus on helping students complete remedial coursework before entering a degree or certificate program (DE, 2020). By providing structured support early in the college experience, these initiatives increase access to postsecondary education and improve student retention and completion rates. Individual student outcomes also highlight the impact of VR support. For example, a student with significant physical disabilities resulting from a stroke was able to successfully complete a four-year college degree. With the support of VR services, knowledgeable professionals, and strong family involvement, the student was able to access necessary accommodations and persist through a rigorous academic program (DE). This example demonstrates how coordinated supports, combined with student motivation, can lead to meaningful postsecondary success.

3.5 Postsecondary Employment Options

Supporting students with disabilities in achieving meaningful employment after high school is a central goal of transition planning and disability policy in the United States. Federal legislation, including the Rehabilitation Act as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), emphasizes maximizing opportunities for competitive integrated employment, where individuals with disabilities work alongside peers without disabilities and earn comparable wages (DE, 2020).

Preparing for Careers

Career development begins well before students exit high school and continues into postsecondary education and adulthood. Students typically progress through several stages, including career awareness, career exploration, career decision making, career preparation, and career placement. Throughout this process, vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors and educators work together to help students identify their interests, strengths, and goals, and to develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) that outlines the services and supports needed to achieve those goals (DE, 2020). Early participation in job readiness training is especially important. This may include learning how to write resumes, complete job applications, practice interview skills, develop workplace behaviors, and participate in job clubs. These experiences help students build the foundational skills needed to successfully obtain and maintain employment (DE).

On-the-Job Training

One pathway to employment is on-the-job training (OJT), which allows students to learn job-specific skills directly in a work environment (DE, 2020). OJT is often connected to real job opportunities and may be paid or unpaid. Through this experience, students gain hands-on skills and may be offered employment after the training period. VR counselors often help coordinate these opportunities and may provide additional supports such as transportation or job-related services (DE).

Types of Employment Outcomes

Students and youth with disabilities can pursue several types of employment outcomes through transition planning and VR services (DE, 2020):

- **Competitive Integrated Employment:** This is the preferred outcome under federal law. Students work in integrated settings alongside individuals

without disabilities, receive competitive wages, and have equal opportunities for advancement and benefits. This type of employment promotes inclusion and economic independence.

- **Supported Employment:** Supported employment is designed for individuals with more significant disabilities who require ongoing support to succeed in the workplace. This may include services such as job coaching, where a trained professional provides instruction, reinforcement, and assistance with job tasks. Over time, support may decrease as the individual gains independence, and natural supports from coworkers or supervisors may be developed.
- **Customized (Carved) Employment:** Customized employment involves tailoring job duties, schedules, or responsibilities to match a student's strengths and interests while also meeting the needs of an employer. This approach focuses on creating individualized job opportunities rather than fitting the student into an existing role.
- **Self-Employment:** Some students may choose to pursue self-employment, working independently in a business or trade that aligns with their interests and skills. VR agencies may support this pathway by assisting with business planning, training, and start-up costs. Students typically develop a business plan that outlines their goals, market analysis, and support needs.

Ongoing Supports and Services

For students who require continued assistance, extended services such as job coaching, follow-up support, transportation, or counseling may be provided to help maintain employment (DE, 2020). These supports are often coordinated through VR agencies or other community partners and are outlined in the student's IPE (DE).

3.6 Post-School Pathways for Students with Extensive Support Needs

Students with extensive support needs (ESN) are individuals who require significant and ongoing assistance across multiple areas of functioning, such as daily living, communication, mobility, or behavior (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). These students often benefit from highly individualized supports and coordinated services to successfully transition into adulthood. For this population, transition planning must focus not only on skill development but also on establishing strong connections to adult service systems and long-term supports (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Transition and Adult Programs (Ages 18–22)

Many school districts offer transition programs that extend services beyond high school, typically until age 22. These programs emphasize practical skill development, including vocational exploration, daily living skills, and community participation. They provide students with additional time to apply what they have learned in school while gradually transitioning into adult service systems and environments (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026).

Employment Pathways

Students with ESN can pursue a range of employment options, including competitive integrated employment, when provided with appropriate supports. Approaches such as supported employment, customized employment, and job carving allow for individualized job roles that align with a student's strengths and interests. Collaboration with job coaches and adult service providers is often essential in helping students develop, obtain, and maintain employment (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026).

Independent and Supported Living

Transition planning for students with ESN may also focus on identifying appropriate living arrangements, such as supported housing, community-based programs, or other adult services that promote independence and inclusion (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). Instruction in daily living skills, personal care, safety, and self-advocacy is critical in preparing students for these environments and increasing their ability to function as independently as possible (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Medical and Behavioral Supports

Many students with ESN require ongoing medical or behavioral supports that must continue into adulthood. Transition planning should include coordination with adult healthcare providers, connection to insurance or public benefits programs, and continuity of mental health or behavioral services (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). Ensuring these supports are in place before a student exits the school system is essential for maintaining stability and well-being.

Interagency Collaboration

Successful transitions for students with ESN depend heavily on collaboration between schools and community agencies. Educators play a key role in helping families connect with services such as vocational rehabilitation, developmental disability agencies, independent living centers, and Social Security programs. Because eligibility processes and waitlists can take time, early planning and proactive coordination are critical (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). Providing families with clear guidance, timelines, and direct connections to service providers can help reduce barriers and create smoother transitions.

Equity and Quality of Life

Transition planning for students with ESN should prioritize quality of life, not just access to services. This includes opportunities for meaningful community participation, social engagement, recreation, and personal choice (El Dorado County Charter SELPA, 2026). Educators should support students in developing independence while also ensuring appropriate levels of safety and support. Additionally, culturally responsive planning is essential, as family perspectives on independence, caregiving, and adult life may vary. Open and respectful collaboration helps ensure that transition plans reflect both the student's goals and the family's values (El Dorado County Charter SELPA).

Section 3 Conclusion

Together, these elements highlight the importance of a comprehensive and collaborative approach to transition planning that extends beyond the classroom. By helping students understand their options, develop self-determination skills, engage in meaningful career experiences, and connect with community supports, educators can better prepare them for successful outcomes after high school. Transition planning is most effective when it empowers students to take an active role in shaping their futures while ensuring they have the resources and support needed to achieve their goals.

Section 3 Key Terms

Adjusted Diploma - A high school completion option based on individualized goals and modified requirements for students who cannot meet standard diploma criteria.

Age of Majority - The age at which students are legally recognized to be of adult age and gain the right to make their own educational and legal decisions.

Alternative Diploma - A diploma aligned to alternate academic standards that may allow students to continue receiving transition services beyond typical graduation.

Apprenticeship - A structured training program that combines paid work experience with instruction in a specific trade or career field.

Career Awareness - The early stage of career development in which students learn about different jobs, industries, and workplace expectations.

Career Exploration - The process of investigating different career options based on a student's interests, strengths, and goals.

Career Placement - The stage of career development in which students secure employment aligned with their skills and interests.

Career Preparation - The stage of career development focused on building the skills, education, and experiences needed for employment.

College Disability Services Office - A department within postsecondary institutions that coordinates accommodations and support services for students with disabilities.

Competitive Integrated Employment - Employment in a setting where individuals with disabilities work alongside peers without disabilities and earn comparable wages and benefits.

Customized Employment - A flexible approach to employment that tailors job duties and responsibilities to align with an individual's strengths and the needs of an employer.

Extended Services - Ongoing supports provided after initial job placement to help individuals maintain employment and succeed in the workplace.

Extensive Support Needs (ESN) - A term used to describe individuals who require significant and ongoing assistance across multiple areas of functioning.

Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) - A document developed through vocational rehabilitation services that outlines a person's employment goals and the supports needed to achieve them.

Informed Choice - The process of making decisions based on a clear understanding of available options, outcomes, and personal preferences.

Job Carving - A strategy that customizes a job by identifying and assigning specific tasks that match an individual's strengths.

On-the-Job Training (OJT) - A work-based learning approach in which individuals learn job skills directly within a workplace setting.

Power of Attorney - A legal arrangement that allows individuals to designate another person to make decisions on their behalf.

Reasonable Accommodations - Adjustments or supports provided in postsecondary or workplace settings to ensure equal access for individuals with disabilities.

Self-Disclosure - The process by which individuals choose to share information about their disability to request supports or accommodations.

Service Network - A coordinated group of agencies, organizations, and providers that support individuals with disabilities in areas such as employment, education, and independent living.

Standard Diploma - A traditional high school diploma earned by meeting state-required academic and assessment criteria.

Supported Decision-Making - A process that allows individuals with disabilities to make their own decisions with guidance from trusted supporters.

Supported Employment - Employment that includes ongoing support services, such as job coaching, for individuals who need assistance to succeed in the workplace.

Transition Program (Ages 18–22) - A school-based program that provides continued services focused on life skills, employment, and independence after high school.

Section 3 Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on how your school currently presents graduation options to students with IEPs and their families. How clear and accessible is this information?
2. What types of work-based learning opportunities are available to students in your setting? Who has access, and who may be missing out?
3. Reflect on your understanding of person-centered planning. How does your current practice center student strengths, preferences, and goals?
4. How does your school collaborate with community agencies or service providers? What partnerships are strong, and where could they be expanded?
5. Consider students with extensive support needs. How does your school ensure their transition plans focus on both independence and quality of life?

Section 3 Activities

1. **Graduation Explanation Tool:** Create a simple, student- and family-friendly guide that explains diploma options and their impact on services.
2. **High Expectations Reflection:** Identify one student for whom expectations could be raised and outline specific ways to provide additional opportunities or supports.
3. **Decision-Making Practice Activity:** Create a structured activity that helps students practice making informed choices about their future options.
4. **VR Services Familiarization:** Research your state's vocational rehabilitation services and identify how students in your school can access them.
5. **Student Goal Conversation:** Meet with a student to discuss future goals and document how the current plan supports or limits those goals.

Course Conclusion

Transition planning is most powerful when it is viewed as a process of preparing students for meaningful adult lives rather than as a checklist of legal requirements. Across this course, we examined the foundational laws and structures that guide transition planning, the role of assessment and data in shaping individualized goals, and the collaborative practices that help students move successfully into postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation. Together, these elements show that effective transition planning depends on thoughtful instruction, coordinated supports, and a clear focus on each student's strengths, interests, and future goals. This course also highlights that future-ready transition practices require educators to look beyond school-based services alone. Students need opportunities to develop self-

determination, explore careers, access work-based learning, understand their rights and responsibilities, and connect with adult service systems before they leave high school. For some students, this may mean preparing for college or competitive employment. For others, it may involve supported living, adult transition programming, or long-term interagency coordination. In every case, high-quality transition planning should reflect the student's individual pathway and promote both opportunity and dignity.

Classroom Example

Mr. Pepper is a high school special education teacher and case manager at a public school that serves students with a wide range of learning, behavioral, and support needs. He works closely with students in grades 9 through 12 and is especially committed to helping them prepare for life after high school. As transition planning becomes a larger focus of his role, Mr. Pepper wants to ensure that the IEP process is not just compliant, but genuinely meaningful for students and families. He believes transition planning should help students build confidence, develop self-advocacy skills, and connect school experiences to future education, employment, and independent living outcomes. However, he has noticed that transition planning meetings can sometimes feel adult-directed, rushed, or overly focused on paperwork rather than the student's vision for the future. Determined to improve this process, Mr. Pepper begins rethinking how transition assessments, student voice, community partnerships, and postsecondary planning can be more intentionally integrated into each student's IEP.

Challenges

- **Making Transition Planning Student-Centered:** Mr. Pepper wants students to play a more active role in their transition planning, but many are unsure

how to talk about their goals, strengths, or support needs. Some students are hesitant to participate in meetings, while others have not had many opportunities to practice self-advocacy. He wants the transition IEP process to feel meaningful and empowering rather than something done to the student.

- **Using Assessment Data Effectively:** Mr. Pepper collects transition assessment information, but he sometimes finds it difficult to translate that data into strong postsecondary goals, annual IEP goals, and coordinated transition services. He wants to make sure that assessment results are not just filed away, but actually used to guide planning in clear and practical ways.
- **Connecting School Experiences to Real-World Outcomes:** Although students may identify goals related to employment, college, or independent living, those goals do not always align with their current coursework, classroom instruction, or community-based experiences. Mr. Pepper wants to better connect what students are doing now in school to the skills they will need after graduation.

Considerations for Support and Improvement

- What strategies can he use to interpret transition assessment data more effectively and connect it to measurable postsecondary goals, annual IEP goals, and transition services?
- How might he better align students' coursework, work-based learning opportunities, and community experiences with their long-term goals for education, employment, and independent living?

- In what ways can he make graduation pathways, postsecondary rights, and adult service systems easier for families to understand so they can participate more confidently in planning?
- How can he strengthen collaboration with vocational rehabilitation counselors, community agencies, employers, and postsecondary programs to support smoother transitions after high school?
- What approaches can help him create individualized transition plans that reflect a wide range of student pathways, including college, career training, competitive employment, supported employment, and adult living services?



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