



# Foundations of Special Education

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

## Chapter 14: Transition

Motivational speaker [Tony Robbins](#) says,

"Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible."

IEP requirements for transitioning to adult life are part of an essential process that helps students set realistic and achievable goals for the future.

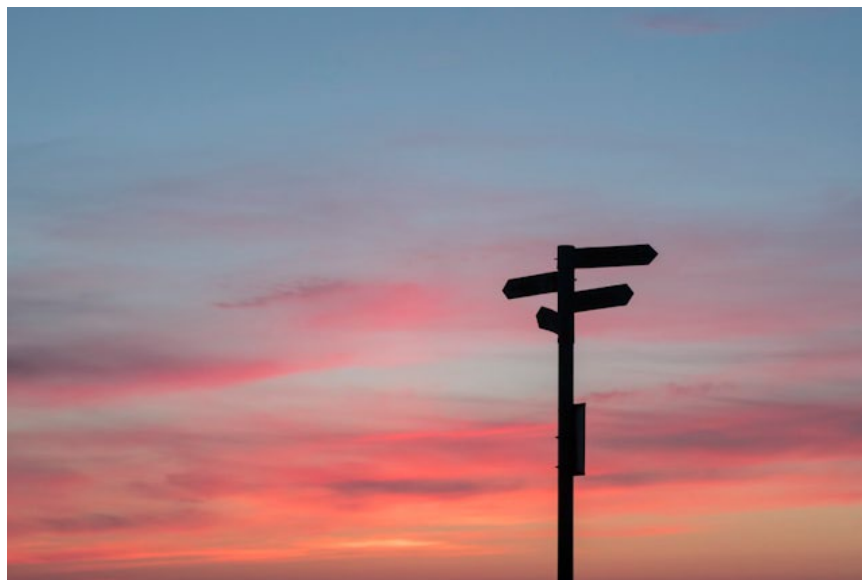


Image: Allegue Barros, J. (2018, July 31). *Silhouette of road signage during golden hour*. Unsplash.com (Unsplash free to use)

### Introduction

Transition planning is much more than simply filling out an extra section of the Individualized Education Program (IEP). It is a collaborative process that brings together students, families, educators, and community agencies to create a shared vision for the future. Effective transition planning builds on individual abilities and preferences to

prepare learners for meaningful participation in postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community life.

In this chapter, you will learn about the legal requirements for transition planning under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the role of transition assessment in developing individualized goals, and the services that help students prepare for life after high school. You will also explore issues related to graduation, the transfer of educational rights, adult education, employment, housing, and community living. The chapter concludes by examining the continuing work of advocacy organizations and communities to ensure that individuals with disabilities have opportunities not only to participate in society, but also to experience belonging, be treated with dignity, and live lives of purpose.

## Overview of Transition Services

Transition planning is the process of preparing students with disabilities for life after high school. Through this collaborative process, students work with their families, educators, and other members of the IEP team to identify the types of employment, postsecondary education, training, independent living options, and community participation they might want to pursue after high school. The transition plan does not replace any of the other sections in the IEP that have already been discussed, but is recorded in a separate section of the IEP specifically designated for transition planning ([Lee, n.d.b](#)).

According to IDEA:

(a) Transition services means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that—

(1) Is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;

(2) Is based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and includes—

- (i) Instruction;
- (ii) Related services;
- (iii) Community experiences;
- (iv) The development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and
- (v) If appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation.

(b) Transition services for children with disabilities may be special education, if provided as specially designed instruction, or a related service, if required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education ([IDEA, 2017a](#)).

## Transition Assessment and Goals



A transition plan allows the student with disabilities to set realistic and achievable goals for adult life after high school.

Video: Understood. (2018, January 11). *How to put together a successful IEP transition plan*.

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf3R3iGi4FY>

The first time that the IEP team is required under IDEA law to include transition goals and services in the student's program is when designing the IEP that will be in place the year the student turns 16. However, many states and school districts feel 16 is too late and they require that this process be started by the time the student turns 14. Even in states where formal transition planning is not required until age 16, it is still considered best practice to begin discussing the student's postsecondary goals and transition needs by age 14.

Although a formal transition plan may not yet be included in the IEP, these early conversations help the team identify priorities and align instruction with the student's future goals. The purpose of transition planning is to prepare students for successful adult lives by helping them identify meaningful postsecondary goals and the steps needed to achieve them. Transition planning typically addresses areas such as postsecondary education or training, employment, independent living, and community participation ([Lee, n.d.b](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Students must be invited to their IEP meetings whenever one of the purposes of the meeting is to consider their postsecondary goals and the transitions services needed to meet those goals. Student participation helps ensure that transition planning reflects the individual's strengths, interests, and preferences while encouraging self-determination and self-advocacy. If the student does not attend the meeting, the school must take steps to ensure the student's interests and preferences are considered. When another public agency is likely to provide or pay for transition services after the student leaves school, a representative of that agency should also be invited to the meeting, provided the school first obtains parental consent or the consent of the student if educational rights have transferred, for that representative to attend ([Lee, n.d.a](#); [NASET, 2024](#); [Lee, n.d.b](#))

IDEA requires that transition services

- (b) Beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP Team, and updated annually, thereafter, the IEP must include—

- (1) Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and
- (2) The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals ([IDEA, 2017d](#)).

As noted above, the IEP must include transition related goals that are based on age-appropriate assessment. Transition assessment is an ongoing process that uses a variety of formal and informal measures to identify the student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs related to postsecondary education or training, employment, and, when appropriate, independent living. Assessment information may be gathered through formal tests, student interviews, parent and teacher questionnaires, observations, work-based assessments, and reviews of existing educational records. IDEA does not require any particular assessment instrument; instead, the IEP team should choose assessment methods that best fit the individual student and provide the information needed for transition planning. Several transition assessments that have been designed specifically for use with students with disabilities are available for teacher use. When appropriate, the team may also recommend a functional vocational evaluation to identify the student's strengths, interests, and support needs in authentic work settings. Other useful sources of information include ACT or SAT scores, academic achievement data, and evaluations of communication, motor, and functional skills ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Because transition assessment often consists of informal measures embedded within classroom instruction, community experiences, and other educational activities, parental consent is generally not required when the purpose of the assessment is to develop appropriate postsecondary goals and transition services for the IEP. However, if the transition assessment is part of an assessment for the purpose of determining eligibility or is part of the reevaluation process, then parental consent is required. If in doubt about whether parent consent is necessary, it is best to err on the side of caution and obtain consent ([Lee, n.d.a](#); [IDEA, 2019](#)).

Information gathered through transition assessment may be included in the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) and used to guide instructional decisions and in the development of annual IEP goals. It also serves as the foundation for the measurable postsecondary goals included in the transition section of the IEP. IDEA requires measurable postsecondary goals in the areas of education or training and employment. These may be written as separate education and training goals; however, it is acceptable to write one combined goal for training and education if the team determines that separate goals are not necessary for a particular student. Every student must also have an employment goal, including students with the most significant disabilities. A measurable postsecondary goal related to independent living is required only when the IEP team determines that it is appropriate based on the student's individual needs. Any annual IEP goals developed to support these postsecondary goals should include measurable baselines and procedures for monitoring student progress while the student remains in school ([Lee, n.d.b](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

What to learn more? Understood is an organization that provides resources and information to support learners with disabilities. Their resources include sample IEP transition plans for careers and college. ([Lee, 2020](#)).

## Transition Services

The IEP must identify the courses of study and transition services needed to help the student achieve the measurable postsecondary goals identified in the transition plan. These services must be individualized and based on the student's unique strengths, needs, preferences, and interests. As is the case in other areas of special education, these services do not need to be designed to maximize a student's potential; however, they must provide meaningful benefit to the learner. The plan should include a combination of instruction focused on transition and post-school related topics, community-based experiences, and the development of employment skills. For some students, the plan will also address the acquisition of daily living skills. If a learner requires related services to

benefit from these activities, that must be included in the plan as well ([Lee, n.d.b](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Transition services can include a wide variety of activities, depending on the student's interests, strengths, and postsecondary goals. Some typical ones include:

- Career exploration and career interest inventories
- Vocational education and career and technical education programs
- Job shadowing, internships, and paid or unpaid work experiences
- Instruction in self-advocacy and self-determination
- Exploration of college, technical school, apprenticeship, or other postsecondary education programs
- Instruction in independent living skills, such as budgeting, transportation, meal preparation, and personal care
- Community-based instruction and participation in community activities

Students will follow a variety of pathways after leaving high school. Some will enroll in colleges, universities, technical schools, apprenticeship programs, or adult education programs. Others will move directly into competitive integrated employment or supported employment. While many individuals with disabilities will live and work independently, others may benefit from supported living services or ongoing community supports. Adult service agencies and community organizations can provide a wide range of services that help individuals with disabilities participate fully in postsecondary education, employment, independent living, recreation, and community life ([Lee, n.d.b](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

## Transfer of Rights

Beginning no later than one year before a student reaches the age of majority, the IEP must include information about the transfer of educational rights that will occur when the student reaches the age of majority, which in most states is age 18 ([NASET, 2024](#)):

- (c) Transfer of rights at age of majority. Beginning not later than one year before the child reaches the age of majority under State law, the IEP must include a statement

that the child has been informed of the child's rights under Part B of the Act, if any, that will transfer to the child on reaching the age of majority under §300.520 ([IDEA, 2017d](#)).

The **age of majority** is the age at which an individual is legally recognized as an adult. While this is age 18 in most U.S. states, in Alabama and Nebraska the age of majority is 19, and in Mississippi the age of majority is 21. States may also establish different legal ages for activities such as driving, voting, and marriage, which may not correspond to the age of majority. When students reach the age of majority, educational rights under IDEA transfer from the parents to the student unless a legal guardian has been appointed or another legal arrangement has been made under state law. As adults, students have the right to make decisions about their educational programs, including participation in IEP meetings, consent for evaluations and services, and access to their educational records. For some students with significant disabilities, families may explore alternatives such as supported decision-making or guardianship before the transfer of rights occurs. These decisions should be made on an individual basis and in accordance with state law ([Interstate Commission for Juveniles, 2024](#)).

## Graduation



A school's obligation to provide a free and appropriate education ends if a student meets the requirements to graduate with a standard diploma.

Image: Danilyuk, P. (2021, April 18). *A group of people wearing academic dress*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Graduation from high school with a regular diploma ends a learner's access to special education services under IDEA.

(a) The obligation to make FAPE available to all children with disabilities does not apply with respect to the following:

- (i) Children with disabilities who have graduated from high school with a regular high school diploma.
- (ii) The exception in paragraph (a)(3)(i) of this section does not apply to children who have graduated from high school but have not been awarded a regular high school diploma.
- (iii) Graduation from high school with a regular high school diploma constitutes a change in placement, requiring written prior notice in accordance with §300.503.
- (iv) As used in paragraphs (a)(3)(i) through (iii) of this section, the term regular high school diploma means the standard high school diploma awarded to

the preponderance of students in the State that is fully aligned with State standards, or a higher diploma, except that a regular high school diploma shall not be aligned to the alternate academic achievement standards described in section 1111(b)(1)(E) of the ESEA. A regular high school diploma does not include a recognized equivalent of a diploma, such as a general equivalency diploma, certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or similar lesser credential ([IDEA, 2017b](#)).

Under IDEA, students with disabilities are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) until they reach the maximum age established by state law, provided they have not graduated with a regular high school diploma. Federal law requires states to provide FAPE for these students through at least age 21, although states may choose to extend eligibility beyond that age. For example, Michigan provides special education services until age 26 for eligible students. Nevertheless, the school's obligation to provide FAPE ends once a student has met the requirements to graduate with a standard diploma. Students who receive alternative diplomas based solely on the completion of IEP goals, such as a certificate of attendance or a certificate of completion, remain eligible to receive FAPE because these credentials are not considered regular high school diplomas under IDEA ([Understood, n.d.](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Decisions on whether a student is prepared to graduate are made by the IEP team and must be based on assessment data, progress toward graduation requirements, and the student's postsecondary goals. If a student has not yet met the requirements for graduation with a regular high school diploma, the IEP team may recommend continuing special education services until the maximum age of eligibility when doing so is in the student's best educational interest. However, if the team recommends the student receive continued services but also recommends a shortened schedule, such as a shortened day or a shortened week, the team must have a clear, logical, and convincing explanation along with supporting data for this decision. In addition, graduation is considered a change in placement, so schools need to send Prior Written Notice and Procedural Safeguards to parents prior to graduation indicating this change in placement. Schools also need to

provide a Summary of Performance which includes the team's recommendations on how best to assist the learner in meeting their postsecondary goals after graduation (Understood, n.d.; NASET, 2024).

## Adult Educational Programming



Noorthoek Academy attendees celebrate their successes together.

Image © Noorthoek Academy, 2024. Used with permission.

Many larger communities offer educational, vocational, and community-based programs for adults with disabilities, although the availability and extent of these services varies widely by location. Traditionally, postsecondary opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities were often limited to community-based instruction and vocational training programs. Today, an increasing number of colleges and universities are starting to offer programs designed specifically to support adult learners with disabilities.

While most colleges and universities are prepared to support students with learning disabilities or orthopedic impairments, [Noorthoek Academy](#) has been successfully providing post-secondary educational experiences for adults with intellectual disabilities for more than 30 years. Noorthoek Academy is just one example of what a college-based program for adults with intellectual disabilities could look like.

In this essay, Lyn VanTol, executive director of Noorthoek Academy and the parent of an adult daughter with a disability tells [Noorthoek Academy's Story: Serving Adults with Intellectual Disabilities](#).

## Daily Living



Benjamin's Hope is a community designed to support adults with disabilities while fostering meaningful relationships between residents and the surrounding community.

Image © Benjamin's Hope, 2024. Used with permission.

Just as adults with disabilities have a variety of postsecondary education options, they also have a range of housing and living arrangements. Many adults with disabilities live independently, while others benefit from varying levels of support. Depending on an individual's strengths, needs, and preferences, housing options may include supported housing, group homes, assisted living, or other residential programs designed to promote independence, community participation, and quality of life.

One example of an innovative residential model is [Benjamin's Hope](#), a community designed to support adults with disabilities while fostering meaningful relationships between residents and the surrounding community. To support this goal, the leadership

team of Benjamin's Hope has prioritized creating a campus that is as inviting to their residents as it is to the many community members who enjoy gathering there.

In this essay, Krista Mason, co-founder of Benjamin's Hope and the parent of an adult son with autism, describes the experiences that led her family to create this unique community and shares the vision that continues to guide its mission. The essay is called [Benjamin's Hope: Dignity in Action](#)

## Planning For the Future

As we conclude this overview of special education, it is important to reflect on how far society has come in its understanding, acceptance, and support of individuals with disabilities while also recognizing the work that remains. Earlier chapters explored the historical treatment of individuals with disabilities, the development of special education law, and the educational practices that have expanded opportunities for inclusion and participation. Although significant progress has been made, advocacy continues to play an essential role in improving educational opportunities, community participation, employment, and quality of life. One organization that has been at the forefront of these efforts for more than 70 years is [The Arc](#). While The Arc primarily advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, its work has influenced legislation, public policy, and community supports that have benefited individuals across the broader disability community ([Arc, 2026](#)).

In 2011, The Arc conducted a comprehensive study examining educational experiences and adult outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The report highlighted both meaningful progress in expanding opportunities for community living and continuing challenges related to employment and years-long waitlists for community supports ([Arc, 2011](#)). More recent national reports suggest that important progress has continued, but significant challenges still remain. [National Core Indicators \(NCI-IDD\)](#) data show increasing opportunities related to community living and participation. However, employment rates for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities remain substantially lower than desired, and many individuals continue to

experience barriers to obtaining competitive integrated employment. Families also continue to report challenges in accessing community services, housing supports, transportation, and qualified direct support professionals. These findings suggest that, although inclusion has become the expectation in many areas of life, continued advocacy is needed to ensure that individuals with disabilities have equitable opportunities to live, learn, work, and participate fully in their communities ([National Core Indicators, 2026](#)).

Want to be inspired? Read [\*A New and Reinvigorated Movement for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Their Families\* \(Arc, 2011\)](#). The Arc's call to action reminds us that progress in special education has always depended on individuals with disabilities, their families, educators, and other community members working together to create more inclusive schools and communities. Although much has been accomplished, there is still important work to be done.

## Conclusion



Ultimately, the goal of special education is to prepare students to lead fulfilling adult lives through meaningful participation in their families, workplaces, churches, and communities.

Image: Mart Production. (2021, March 16). *A group of diverse adults, including those in wheelchairs, smiling in a cafe environment.* Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Transition planning is about preparing students for meaningful adult lives. Although tremendous progress has been made in expanding opportunities for individuals with disabilities, important challenges remain. Individuals with disabilities continue to face barriers to employment, housing, community supports, and other adult services. As educators, your responsibility extends beyond teaching academic skills. You also serve as advocates, collaborators, and problem-solvers who help create schools and communities where every individual is welcomed, valued, and given opportunities to contribute. Ultimately, the goal of special education is to prepare students to lead fulfilling adult lives through meaningful participation in their families, workplaces, churches, and communities.

### Notice and Reflect: Life Beyond School

Visit a local business, college campus, community recreation program, church, or other public setting. Observe the environment through the eyes of a young adult with a disability who is transitioning from high school into adult life.

Reflect:

- What barriers to participation do you notice?
- What supports or accommodations are available that promote access and inclusion?
- How welcoming does the environment appear to be for individuals with a variety of disabilities?
- What additional changes could be made to make participation easier or more meaningful?
- How might schools partner with an organization like this to prepare students for successful transition to adult life?
- How might educators, families, and community organizations work together to improve opportunities for adults with disabilities.

## Glossary

- **Age of majority.** The age at which an individual is legally recognized as an adult. In most U.S. states, it is 18 years of age.

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