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At What Age?

Federal law says that transition plans must be in place by the time a student turns 16 years of age. Some states have narrowed this parameter to 14 years of age. The law also states that transition plans may be in place earlier if deemed appropriate by the student's IEP team.

It is a common misconception among educators that their state will fault, or "ding," them for transition plans created earlier than the required age. Actually, state audits only comment that they cannot grade or rate the plan because it is not yet a required component. Therefore, if an IEP team decides that a transition plan is appropriate for a 10 year old, then they are perfectly within their bounds to create and implement such a plan. These early plans may be good for select students with severe disabilities and should be considered based on parent input.

What is Transition Planning?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines transition planning and services as:

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.

There is so much to unpack here that it cannot be covered thoroughly in one newsletter. Here, I will briefly describe what this all means before covering things in more detail later on.

Transition Planning and Services is helping students with disabilities prepare for life after school by building the necessary skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. This is done through assessing student strengths and lagging skills. The teachers and parents plan instruction and activities that build those skills to a level of independent proficiency. This process may look different based on the disability and the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance.

Students with more mild to moderate disabilities have greater ability to be active participants in the transition planning process. Students with more severe disabilities may need more assistance through parent and teacher interviews to gather the needed information. Because there is such a wide spectrum of abilities (especially communicative abilities), there is no "gold standard" for transition assessment. There are many different kinds of assessment, from formal ones that score results based on standardized national samples to informal, semi-structured interviews. Teachers and parents should work together to find assessments that work for the individual student.

Transition services also look different based on student ability level. This can look like specially designed instruction for academics or special services that focus on related skills. It may also include both of these types of services, depending on assessment results.

Transition Planning for All

When we think of transition planning, it is common for us, parents and educators, to think of students with severe disabilities. It is true that many items and instruction are targeted to our students with more severe disabilities. However, the process applies to all students who have an IEP.

We can't always predict what a student is fully prepared to do independently without assessing first. A student who only receives services in math for a mild specific learning disability may also have trouble with persistence or self-awareness. Or, that same student, may have difficulty planning or sticking to a plan. These skills are essential when looking at postsecondary education and employment outcomes.

Self-determination and self-awareness are two other areas that are applicable to all areas of transition planning regardless of disability. These skills involve choice and decision making, goal setting, and getting the supports that are needed to be successful in all areas of life.

The bottom line is this: no matter the disability, all students need thorough transition assessment and planning in order to be successful. Let's not assume; let's plan.



Why Does Transition Planning Matter?

The reason has more to do with disability awareness and changing narratives than law.

If someone were to tell you that transition matters because it is a legal requirement, they would only be partially correct. Transition planning and services matter because long-term outcomes for individuals with disabilities become bleak without it. A little bit of background knowledge may help with understanding here.

Prior to IDEA, individuals with severe disabilities were not allowed to be educated with their peers. Those with more mild to moderate disabilities were mocked until they dropped out of school. Those with disabilities were labeled as “feeble-minded,” “morons,” and other creative adjectives. These practices and mindsets resulted in dismal outcomes for those with disabilities. Incarceration became common, either in prisons or hospitals. Experimental procedures were common (such as lobotomies), as were forced sterilizations.

The mindset behind the early history of disability treatment was that people with disabilities are a burden to society. Children were not allowed to attend school because teachers did not want to deal with challenging behaviors. Administrators did not want to have these kids messing up test scores. Families and communities did not want to be “embarrassed” by the behaviors and lower “intellectual functioning” people with disabilities demonstrated in public (though their own private scandals were okay, but I digress).

Societal changes were slow. Laws, practices, and mindsets gradually began to change in the mid 70s through the 90s. We got Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed first. Then IDEA was passed and renewed over the years. It wasn't until the 1997 renewal that transition planning and services became a federal mandate.

History teaches us that transition planning and services isn't about law. It is about changing mindsets. It is about improving quality of life outcomes. It is about, most importantly, ensuring everyone has the same opportunity to be valuable contributing members of their society in such a way that can bring joy. Some may ask why they should spend so much time assessing and making plans, year after year. My answer is simple: because those students deserve it. Quality transition planning doesn't just benefit the student, it benefits everyone. We as parents, educators, and advocates need to believe that if we are to continue to change narratives and outcomes.