

Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2017-1: Characteristics of High Quality Secondary Transition Services

To: Administrators of Special Education, Parents, Students, and Other Interested Parties

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Purpose

The purpose of this advisory is to help school districts improve outcomes for students with IEPs and to promote compliance with state and federal special education law by highlighting three characteristics of appropriate high quality secondary transition service delivery:

1. Transition Services should be coordinated.
2. Transition services should be provided based on the needs, strengths, preferences, and interests of individual students.
3. Transition services should be results oriented.

This advisory complements the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE)'s previously-issued advisories regarding transition goals, transition assessment, and self-determination,¹ and aligns with the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)'s prioritization of *Results Driven Accountability*.² It also aligns with the Commonwealth's goal of college and career readiness for all students.³

Background

Secondary Transition services are defined in IDEA as a coordinated set of activities within an individualized, results oriented process designed to improve students' academic and functional achievement and thus prepare them for life after high school.⁴ Transition services help students with IEPs build the skills they will need to live successful lives as adult learners, workers, and community members. Each year from age 14 (or earlier) onward,⁵ the IEP team helps each student to understand their needs, strengths, preferences, and interests, and to refine their postsecondary goals (i.e., vision) through ongoing age-appropriate transition assessment.⁶ The team then develops measurable annual IEP goals and designates transition services to address the student's disability-related needs and build skills in an additive fashion, moving the student closer each year toward achieving their postsecondary goals.

Characteristic #1: Transition services should be coordinated.

Transition services should be coordinated both at a systems and individual level as part of a purposeful, sequential, developmental IEP process.

Systems Level Coordination

School districts should provide a sufficient range and continuum of coordinated transition services to meet the full range of students' needs across the age span of 14 to 22 years.⁷ For older students (18-22), school districts must have available a sufficient breadth of transition services to teach these transition skills to all students who need them:

- skills necessary for postsecondary education and/or training,
- skills needed to seek, obtain and maintain employment,
- skills necessary for independent living,
- skills needed to access community services, and
- skills used to self-manage medical and other personal needs.⁸

When developing a continuum of services for students from age 14 onward, districts should consider **integrating special education services with the experiences and opportunities available to students without disabilities**.⁹ For example, how might guidance counselors, work-and-learning coordinators, faculty sponsors of student clubs, athletics coaches, art and music instructors, and others collaborate with special educators to build systems to provide experiences that align with students' needs, strengths, preferences, and interests? School districts should also explore how students with disabilities can gain work skills through whole school supports and services such as Connecting Activities,¹⁰ the Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan,¹¹ and Individual Learning Plans.¹²

Partnerships enhance districts' ability to provide a sufficient range and continuum of transition services. School districts can effectively implement appropriate transition services by **collaborating with community entities** such as institutions of higher education, employers, workforce investment boards, independent living centers, adult agencies, YMCAs, and adult education programs. Many districts already have connections to local career one-stops and businesses through work-and-learning programs for all students; special educators can improve transition services by partnering with these systems. The 2014 federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)¹³ encourages a fully integrated workforce system with services to in-school youth with the full range of disabilities, including closer relationships between **vocational rehabilitation agencies and schools**. As part of this initiative, districts are urged to strengthen partnerships with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC); both of these agencies can provide services such as job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, work-based learning experiences, self-advocacy training, and support for enrollment in postsecondary education programs. School districts can also explore innovative partnerships with **special education collaboratives**, which can offer resources such as professional development and staffing (e.g., transition specialists or job coaches). In this way, school districts are able to expand services beyond those available within the high school walls.

Institutions of higher education can also provide important community learning opportunities. The landscape of Early College options for all students, including those with disabilities, is rich

and varied. Innovative programming flourishes across the state, from unique partnerships between one high school and one college, to statewide systems such as the Commonwealth Dual Enrollment Partnership¹⁴, Gateway to College¹⁵, or the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (ICEI)¹⁶. In order for opportunities like these to be provided, school districts can establish close relationships with local colleges and universities, other school districts, and collaboratives.

School districts can also consider developing interagency councils to promote seamless student transition into adult life. Interagency councils have been created by school districts to include (and coordinate between) school districts, adult human service agencies, employers and employer representatives (such as a workforce investment board or Rotary), local colleges and universities, special education collaboratives, families, students, and other community members. Interagency councils support communication and collaboration, and connect students with resources that might not otherwise be readily available.

Individual Level Coordination

Transition services for each individual student with an IEP should be provided in a well-thought-out, stepwise, developmental progression so that each year students build new skills that move them closer toward achieving their postsecondary goals. When the student is age 14 (or earlier), the IEP team uses the Transition Planning Form (TPF)¹⁷ to map out the opportunities the student will experience that year in the areas of instruction, employment, and community participation – opportunities that can be provided by the school, families, employers, community members, and other stakeholders in the student’s life. The IEP team decides which transition services the school will provide, and these are recorded in the IEP.¹⁸

Each subsequent year until the student exits school, the team should look back at the previous years’ TPFs and IEPs to track progress. The TPF is a discussion guide, and nothing recorded on it that is not recorded in the IEP is required by law to occur. If actions steps outlined on the TPF did in fact not occur in the previous year, why not? What meaningful and feasible action steps can the team develop this year?

For the IEP:

- Which specific skills did the student gain through last year’s transition services?
- Did the student achieve last year’s measurable annual IEP goals? If not, why not?
- Which measurable annual IEP goals will address this year’s disability-related needs and build this year’s skills, to assist the student in meeting their measurable postsecondary goals?
- Which transition services does the student need, recorded in the IEP, to promote the accomplishment of this year’s measurable annual IEP goals and move the student closer each year toward achieving the postsecondary goals?

As the IEP team looks backwards and forwards, it should be informed by the results of transition assessment such as classroom and community observations, interviews, formal

assessment, standardized tests, academic assessments, behavioral assessments, self-determination scales, the Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan (WBLP), etc.¹⁹

Characteristic # 2: Transition services should be provided based on the needs, strengths, preferences, and interests of individual students.

Like all other special education services, transition services must be individually tailored to address each student's unique needs.²⁰ Individualization means that students with similar disability profiles may require very different transition services, because individual students may have different needs, strengths, preferences, interests, and postsecondary goals. The IEP team should consider a full range of possible services, not limited by existing programming or disability type.

All students, with and without disabilities, can benefit from a variety of experiences. For example, the ESE's Career Development Education framework²¹ recommends that all students experience the full continuum of career awareness, career exploration, and career immersion opportunities during high school. Many adults find a career that is a good fit by trying out a range of jobs from their teenage years onward. As most adults know from personal experience, even a disliked job can teach much about the rules of the workplace, appropriate personal and social skills, persistence and motivation, the dignity of work, and one's own inclinations. As much as possible, however, students' experiences should align with their individual preferences and interests. Students should not be placed indefinitely in a disliked setting, or in a setting that has no relationship to the student's postsecondary goals. Students with disabilities drop out of school and fail to graduate at a higher rate than other students.²² To stop this trend, we need to support students' motivations, aspirations, and investment in their own education. The more students can determine their own futures, the more promising those futures are likely to be. Of course, all young people grow and mature each year, and their preferences and interests will change based on their experiences and the natural developmental process. Transition services need to change and adapt with them.

Addressing each student's individual needs often requires creating and supporting individualized learning opportunities in the community – for example, by assisting individual students to access higher education courses, customizing authentic paid employment opportunities, or facilitating/preparing for meaningful participation in leisure and recreational activities.

Characteristic #3: Transition services should be results oriented.

Transition services must be results oriented.²³ In other words, they must develop students' functional and academic skills needed to make meaningful and effective progress towards achieving their postsecondary goals in the domains of postsecondary education/training, competitive employment, independent living, and community participation as appropriate to each student.²⁴ The IDEA emphasizes that providing effective transition services to promote successful post-school employment or education is an important measure of accountability for

students with disabilities.²⁵ Students' ongoing acquisition of functional and academic skills is monitored through formal and informal transition assessment.

Results oriented transition services encourage students to function as independently as possible. For example, through teaching, scaffolding, and fading supports, students with executive function challenges can be taught to plan, gather necessary materials, coordinate with other people, and successfully execute a project. For other students, one-to-one paraprofessional support can be faded as students learn to demonstrate skills with less assistance from others.

Results oriented transition services also support students to generalize and transfer skills throughout all the community environments where they will be living, working, or going to school as adults. For example, students might initially be taught pragmatic language skills through specialized instruction and practice with nondisabled peers in school. However, in order for pragmatic language skills to be learned so they will generalize across multiple adult settings, it is often necessary for students to receive instruction in the environments in which they will live, work, and learn when they are adults. A speech-language pathologist or other social skills expert may need to provide instruction and coaching to a student at a community-based job or recreation site. For many students with disabilities, the development of pragmatic communication and social skills is critical to lifelong success.

Results oriented transition services promote least restrictive environment (LRE) principles. The right to a free and appropriate public education in the LRE is foundational to the IDEA and is supported by research on student outcomes. For example, research conducted in Massachusetts found that students with disabilities who were educated in inclusive settings were much more likely to graduate than those who were educated in substantially separate settings.²⁶ Therefore, to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities must have the opportunity to learn academic and functional skills with age-appropriate people who do not have disabilities, both in school and in the community.²⁷ Supplementary aids and services (for example, a job or education coach, or assistive technology) must be provided, as necessary, to support students' successful placement in the LRE.²⁸ Of course, not all students will require supplementary aids and services; natural supports such as peers, co-workers, and employers are the first choice, because this mirrors experiences for those who do not have disabilities.

As many students with disabilities grow older, an increasing amount of their transition services should be provided in community settings. This is particularly true for older students who have completed four years of high school and remain eligible for special education services. Since they no longer have age-appropriate, nondisabled peers at the high school, the least restrictive environment for these older students – indeed, the “general curriculum” for these students – is most often the community, the colleges and training programs, and jobs where their former classmates are now engaged. Full inclusion for these students means interacting most of the day with adults who do not have disabilities, and having experiences and learning skills in environments where most other people do not have disabilities.

Research demonstrates that many transition skills are effectively acquired *only* in the community with nondisabled peers. One example is employment skills, long considered a critical focus of effective transition services.²⁹ Some students are provided opportunities to learn job skills in a setting within the public schools – for example, the school recycling center or principal’s office. This kind of work experience can constitute good first steps in the career development education continuum and can build job skills such as punctuality, self-regulation, and organization. However, by themselves these kinds of experiences may not be sufficient to teach many work skills that a student will need after exiting special education. Research demonstrates that adult employment outcomes for all students – including students with disabilities – are significantly improved when students have the opportunity to learn work skills through multiple and diverse employment opportunities that are paid and that take place in authentic community worksites (as compared to employment specially created for persons with disabilities).³⁰

Finally, in order for students with disabilities to eventually live, work, and learn in the community, they must be able to travel as independently as possible. Transition services can include travel training, which is individualized instruction designed to teach students how to independently use public or paratransit transportation to travel safely and effectively between home, school, work and community.³¹ All adults need to be able to successfully travel from home to work to recreation, and back again.

Conclusion

ESE has placed the highest importance on preparing students to succeed as adults.³² Coordinated, individualized, and results oriented transition services are critical to making this goal a reality for students with disabilities.

¹ The other ESE transition advisories address transition assessments, transition goals, and the age (14 years old) when transition services must begin. The transition advisories, as well as ESE’s self-determination advisory, may be found on ESE’s Transition Services website at www.doe.mass.edu/sped/secondary-transition

² OSEP’s *Results Driven Accountability* shifts from a system focused primarily on compliance to one that puts greater emphasis on results. See OSEP’s results driven accountability home page found online at www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/rda

³ Massachusetts’ *Definition of Career and College Readiness* includes:

- *Learning skills* which include reading, writing and mathematical problem solving.
- *Workplace readiness* which includes attendance and punctuality, accepting direction with a positive attitude, taking initiative, communicating well and interacting with co-workers.
- *Quantitative and qualitative abilities* (referred to as “qualities and strategies”) which include the ability to think critically, be flexible, direct and evaluate one’s own learning, self-advocate, and act responsibly.

See www.mass.edu/library/documents/2013College&CareerReadinessDefinition.pdf

⁴ See 20 U.S.C. § 1401(34)(A).

⁵ See MGL c. 71B, s. 2.

⁶ See *Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-4: Transition Assessment in the Secondary Transition Planning Process*, www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2014-4ta.html

⁷ IDEA regulations (34 CFR 300.115) require each school district to have a continuum of alternative placements available to meet the needs of students with disabilities for special education and related services. The United States Department of Education has further explained that “the LEA has an obligation to make available a full continuum of alternative placement options that maximize opportunities for its children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled peers to the extent appropriate.” 71 Fed. Reg. at 46588.

⁸ See 603 CMR 28.06(4).

⁹ See Teresa Grossi and Cassandra Cole, *Teaching Transition Skills in Inclusive Schools* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. 2013).

¹⁰ Connecting Activities is an ESE initiative that leverages a statewide infrastructure to support college and career readiness for all students. See www.massconnecting.org.

¹¹ The *Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan* was developed by ESE as a diagnostic, goal-setting, and assessment tool designed to drive learning and productivity on the job. See www.skillslibrary.com/wbl.htm

¹² See the *Massachusetts Guide for Implementing Individual Learning Plans*, found online at www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/schoolcounseling/ilpguidance2014.pdf

¹³ See www.doleta.gov/wioa

¹⁴ See www.mass.edu/strategic/read_cdep.asp

¹⁵ Several Massachusetts community colleges participate in this national initiative which serves at-risk youth, www.gatewaytocollege.org/.

¹⁶ See www.mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/higher-education/initiatives-and-special-programs/inclusive-concurrent-enrollment/.

¹⁷ Mandated Form 28M/9, www.doe.mass.edu/sped/28MR/28m9.pdf

¹⁸ See *Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2013-1: Postsecondary Goals and Annual IEP Goals in the Transition Planning Process*, www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/13_1ta.html

¹⁹ See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/secondary-transition/indicator13-transition-assessment.pdf>

²⁰ See *Bd. of Educ. of the Hendrick Hudson Central Sch. Dist. v. Rowley*, 458 U.S. 176, 181 (1982) (special education services must be “tailored to the unique needs of the handicapped child”).

²¹ www.doe.mass.edu/connect/cde

²² See profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/

²³ As noted in an earlier footnote, OSEP has revised its accountability system, shifting from a system focused primarily on compliance to one that puts more emphasis on results. See also 34 CFR 300.43(a)(1) (requiring transition services to be designed within a results-oriented process).

²⁴ The United States Department of Education has explained that the purpose of transition services is to help students with disabilities “make a successful transition to his or her goals for life after secondary education.” 64 Fed. Reg. 12474-12475. See also 20 U.S.C. § 1401(34)(A).

²⁵ See 20 USC § 1400(c)(14).

²⁶ Hehir, T., Grindal, T., & Eidelman, H. (2012, April). Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Rep.). Retrieved www.doe.mass.edu/sped/hehir/2012-04sped.pdf

²⁷ See 20 USC § 1400(d)(1)(A); 20 USC § 1412(a)(1)(A); 20 USC § 1412(a)(5); MGL c. 71B, s.1.

²⁸ OSEP has concluded that transition services placements, including community work placements, must be based on LRE principles and must include supplementary aids and services needed to support placement in the LRE. See *Letter to Spitzer-Resnick, Swedeen, and Pugh*, Office of Special Education Programs, 59 IDELR 230, 112 LRP 32664 (June 22, 2012), found online at www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/062212workplacelre2q2012.pdf

See also 34 CFR 300.114(a)(2)(ii); 34 CFR 300.107.

²⁹ See Debra Martin Luecking and Richard G. Luecking, *Translating Research Into a Seamless Transition Model* (March 24, 2015) found online at: cde.sagepub.com/content/38/1/4

³⁰ See “Guideposts for Success” produced by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth (explaining that there is a professional consensus that work experiences and paid employment in the community are highly associated with positive post-school employment outcomes), cited in *Translating Research Into a Seamless Transition Model* by Debra Martin Luecking and Richard G. Luecking (March 24, 2015) found online at: cde.sagepub.com/content/38/1/4 or *Building Skills Through Summer Jobs: Lessons from the Field* (Rep.). (2015). Retrieved www.jporganchase.com/corporate/Corporate-Responsibility/document/54887-jpmc-summeryouth-aw2.pdf

³¹ See 34 CFR 300.39(b)(4)) (defining travel training). See also definition of travel training in recommendations from the Massachusetts Travel Instruction Network to Mass. Dept. of Transportation (October 5, 2015), found online at www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/hst/matin-performance-measures.pdf

³² See www.mass.gov/edu/government/departments-and-boards/ese/