MASSACHUSETTS
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Secondary Transition Planning with the New Individualized Education Program (IEP) Form: Quick Reference Guide

Areas of Focus for the Revised IEP

1. Family and Student Voice
2. Improved Outcomes and Access
3. Least Restrictive Environment
4. Coordinated Transition Planning
5. Accessibility of Language

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) made improvements to the IEP form for use beginning in school year 2023-2024. The new form will help students with disabilities successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education, training, employment, community participation, and independent living. This quick reference guide includes information, recommended strategies, and resources to make the secondary transition planning process go smoothly. For more information and planning considerations related to completing the secondary transition planning section of the new IEP form, see pages 10-13 of the MA IEP Technical Guide.

What is coordinated transition planning? Transition plans are a part of IEPs that help students plan and prepare for their future after high school. DESE's Educational Vision wants all students, including those with disabilities, to be ready for college, careers, and work. Through transition planning, IEP Teams decide on the transition services that the student will receive. Transition services are defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)[1] as "a coordinated set of activities…focused on improving the academic and functional achievement" of the student so that they can move from school to post-school life. Transition planning and services are part of receiving a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under IDEA. High-quality transition services are *coordinated* when they reflect a well-thought-out, developmental progression that helps individual students to build new skills to achieve their postsecondary goals. Additional *systems-level coordination* is necessary to fully integrate special education services with the experiences and opportunities available to students without disabilities.

Planning for the future begins with a student's first IEP. The student, family, and IEP Team develop short- and long-term vision statements for the future throughout the student's school years. Planning becomes more formalized when students approach age 14, or sooner if determined appropriate by an IEP Team. For those students, the IEP starts with more specific questions about the student's vision (also called "postsecondary goals"), and IEP Teams are encouraged to use the student's vision to develop the entire IEP, including the transition planning section.

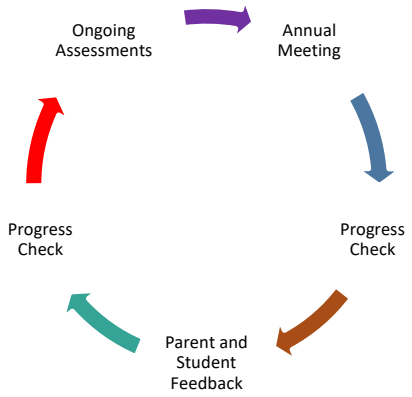
[1] Please see Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulations at 34 C.F.R. § 300.43, which define transition services, and MA DESE's Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2017-1: Characteristics of High Quality Secondary Transition Services.

Strategy 1: Start with the end in mind by clearly defining what the student wants for the future.

Support the student to discover and talk about their dreams for the future. Be familiar with students' academic, community participation, and independent living needs, as well as parents' concerns and expectations. Because students' visions for the future will change as they get older, do not discourage dreams that seem unattainable. Instead, approach their dreams with curiosity and use them as jumping-off points for rich conversations. Presume competence and encourage high expectations. Collaborate with the family and any partnering agencies to provide experiences and learning opportunities that will help students gradually know themselves and the world around them. With this approach, student visions will evolve. If the student, educators, and parents have different opinions, respect the student's voice while explicitly discussing areas of agreement and disagreement. Clearly defined postsecondary goals informed by age-appropriate transition assessments drive a results-oriented transition planning process so that students can function as independently as possible and can generalize and transfer skills throughout all the environments where they will be living, working, and learning as adults.

Resource Spotlight: DESE has released *Discussion Questions to Get Ready for My Yearly IEP Meeting* to help students reflect on their strengths, preferences, interests and goals, and actively participate in IEP Team meetings.

Strategy 2: Regularly gather data using age-appropriate transition assessments to promote effective planning.



Transition assessments drive the planning process by identifying students' strengths, interests, preferences, and areas that may require additional support or instruction. By regularly reassessing these factors, educators and the IEP Team can better align goals with students' changing needs. Transition assessments reflect the increasing complexity of decisions students face as they move through high school and approach postsecondary life. This ongoing assessment process allows for the identification of new skills, interests, and barriers that may not have been evident in earlier assessments. The IEP must include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills.[2] Because clearly defined postsecondary goals must extend beyond school and academics, educators should consider and administer individualized transition assessments in the language that will yield accurate information about the student's ability to function in work, independent life, and community settings. By monitoring students' new skills and preferences, the IEP Team can tailor the transition plan more accurately, ensuring that it remains results-oriented throughout the student's journey toward postsecondary success.

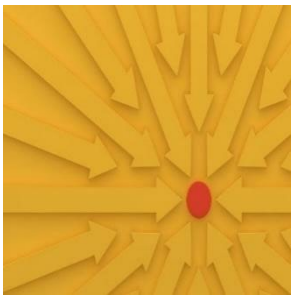
[2] 34 C.F.R. § 300.320(b)(1).

Resource Spotlight: Learn more about Best Practices in Equitable Data and Assessment in this Equitable Data and Assessment RLO developed by the Rennie Center in collaboration with MA DESE.

DESE's advisory on transition assessment is another tool IEP Teams might find helpful when planning and implementing transition assessments.

The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT-C) publishes a comprehensive transition assessment toolkit, The Collaborative Assessment Guide for Transition.

Strategy 3: Transition planning is an ongoing process, not something that occurs only during the annual IEP meeting.



Transition planning is not a static checklist; it is a continuous, collaborative effort that unfolds over the years, starting with the IEP when the student turns 14, or earlier if appropriate. Ongoing data are used to build the transition plan as students build resilience, face new experiences, and encounter learning opportunities that shape their long-term goals. This approach involves using touchpoints between annual meetings, such as assessment windows and feedback conversations with the parent and student, to check on progress and changes. Effective transition planning is also proactive; it allows the IEP Team to address new challenges and make the most of growing strengths.

An ongoing transition planning process creates a sense of empowerment in students, providing them with tools and support to navigate their unique pathway to postsecondary success. When well implemented, this strategy will involve adjusting the vision as the student's preferences and interests change over time (Strategy 1) and updating assessments (Strategy 3) to ensure that services and data remain both relevant and results oriented throughout the *entire* transition planning process.

Resource Spotlight: The DESE website has a page on secondary transition that houses important tools and resources for IEP Teams to use throughout the year.

Strategy 4: Present levels and goals sections focus on academic and functional skills necessary for postsecondary success.

The IEP Team should consider how to design the IEP so that all the parts of the IEP work together to address the student's current abilities and needs, so that the student will succeed in postsecondary life. By focusing on both academic and functional skills, the IEP Team will gain a deeper understanding of the student's capabilities. Academic skills are important for meeting the educational demands beyond high school, while functional skills address the broader set of abilities necessary for independent living, employment, and community participation. Educators, parents, and the student can analyze the skills the student will need in future education, work, and community environments, and then write goals to help the student build those skills sequentially, over time. The IEP is not only a reflection of students' current abilities and needs, but a strategic tool for preparing them for future challenges and opportunities.

Resource Spotlight: This webpage from the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT-C) offers a collection of transition planning resources, including a checklist for compliance with Indicator 13, IEP

case study examples, and toolkits to support schools as they develop programs and services for students with disabilities.

Strategy 5: Collaborate with community-based partners to develop a coordinated transition plan that allows the student to build skills and explore post-school opportunities within and outside school.

Effective collaboration between the school and community partners involves bringing together the right people and resources needed to create a powerful transition plan for the student. When schools engage with colleges, training programs, employers, public transportation, Independent Living Centers, adult service agencies such as DDS, DMH, MRC, and other community-based partners, students can explore real-world experiences and be exposed to different post-school options. Learning extends beyond the classroom, and community-based organizations can offer valuable opportunities that build student skills and promote students' readiness for postsecondary life.

Professionals from relevant agencies, who have specialized knowledge, can also partner with schools to provide skill-building experiences that align with students' needs and goals. For example, vocational rehabilitation providers can collaborate with school professionals to offer Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) that prepare students for careers and allow them to experience various jobs.

Through this collaborative approach, the transition plan becomes interactive and responsive to the strengths and needs of the student. By maintaining open communication and working with the expertise of various partners, the IEP Team can create a more comprehensive and tailored plan that addresses the individual needs and dreams of the student, promoting a smoother transition to postsecondary education, training, employment, community participation, and independent living.

Resource Spotlight: Learn more about interagency collaboration to support transition planning this IRIS Center Module.

Schools can partner with colleges and employers through programs such as Early College, Innovation Career Pathways, and the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI).

Learn more about Pre-Employment Services though NTACT-C's resources, as well as information from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission.

Learn about the Chapter 688 process and about applying for Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services (DDS) adult eligibility for students with autism and students with intellectual disability.