IDEA Transition Services: A Brief Overview

Assisting students with disabilities in the transition from high school to postsecondary activities is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The goal of transition services is to ensure youth are being prepared for adult life after high school. Postsecondary activities may include college, vocational education, continuing and adult education, employment, independent living, or community participation. These activities are included in transition plans within a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP must contain appropriate measurable postsecondary goals and the transition services needed to help the student meet those goals. IEP teams are encouraged to consider a variety of services to help position students to be successful in their postsecondary goals.

TRANSITION SERVICES: WHO ARE TRANSITION-AGE STUDENTS?

Current federal guidance requires transition plans to be included in the first IEP after a student turns 16. State and territorial jurisdictions may have more restrictive requirements (e.g., mandates for transition plan inclusion starting at age 14), but these requirements may not be more lenient than current federal guidance. For these reasons, interested parties must always consult state and territorial requirements for transition services in addition to reviewing federal requirements.

The term transition-age students is commonly used to describe students with disabilities who receive transition services. These youth may or may not be 16 years of age, given that (a) local jurisdictions may have stricter age requirements for transition services and (b) IEP teams may elect to begin transition services prior to the jurisdiction-mandated age.

REQUIREMENTS FOR TRANSITION SERVICES

Transition services are guided not only by IDEA, but also by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (last amended and enacted in 2015). IEP teams should include those typically involved in this work (e.g., the student if appropriate, caregivers, special and general education teachers) and may include members from outside agencies, such as Vocational Rehabilitation. It is important that IEP team members who have interest and expertise in the various areas of postsecondary activity development are included. IEP teams should ensure that transition plans also adhere to basic components of IEPs, for example, meeting least restrictive environment requirements and annual updates.

COMPONENTS OF A TRANSITION PLAN

A transition-age student’s IEP must include age-appropriate assessments based on the needs of the student to determine interests, appropriate measurable postsecondary goals, and the transition services (including courses of study) needed to achieve those goals. IEPs should include annual goals that align with those postsecondary goals.

TRANSITION ASSESSMENTS AND PLANNING

Comprehensive, multidisciplinary transition assessments are vital to the development of appropriate goals and services. The goal of this assessment is to facilitate educational and vocational assessment so that a student can make a successful shift to life after high school. An assessment should include: academic, daily living, and occupational and vocational skills, career maturity (an understanding of self and the work world and decision-making skills), vocational interests and aptitudes, and strengths and weaknesses in each vocational area identified.
CHANGES TO TRANSITION SERVICES IN REAUTHORIZATION OF 2004

The age requirement to make provisions for transition planning was changed in IDEA 2004 from 14 to 16 years old (with the caveat that these services can begin earlier, if the IEP team determines they are needed). Additionally, language was added requiring the inclusion of “… appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills.” This focus on measurable goals aligns closely with provisions for academic and functional goals and enforces the need for transition planning goals, like other IEP goals, to be based on and driven by data (as well as student interest).

RESOURCES


This document is designed to summarize guidance based on federal legislation. State and territorial laws and regulations and local education agency policies may be more restrictive than federal guidance (e.g., they may require that transition plans be included in IEPs starting at age 14, as opposed to age 16, as indicated in federal legislation). Readers are encouraged to access their state or territorial department of education and school district websites for this state and local guidance. Please also note that the function of this document is informational, and it is not intended to provide official legal advice.

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