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Planning for the Future: One Student at a Time

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Introduction

All students with disabilities need a transition plan that reflects their interests, strengths and abilities, with activities that build expectations for meeting the postsecondary goals that are established. It is vital that the plan is based on person-centered practices that include the home, school, and community. This paper will provide information on the critical components of the Individual Education Program (IEP) transition plan and will provide strategies and ideas to assist the IEP team in the planning process.

The Importance of Post-School Preparation

Students with disabilities, like all students exiting high school, need to obtain a wide range of skills, knowledge, and abilities to successfully transition into postsecondary education, employment and independent living. An important piece of legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), provides a framework for students with disabilities to transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment. The process for developing a transition plan in the IEP begins no later than age 16; although some states, including Virginia, require the plan be developed beginning at age 14 ((34 C.F.R. 300.320 [b] and [c]; 20 U.S.C. 1414 [d][1][A][i][VIII]. Individualized planning is the cornerstone for ensuring that students with disabilities are prepared to enter the community.

When beginning this planning process and throughout it, the focus of the team supporting a student is to determine a pathway to become college and career ready. This means that students with disabilities are enrolled in a comprehensive, rigorous curriculum in core academic disciplines and other subjects like technology or employability skills to become well-rounded (cited in Cease-Cook, Fowler, & Test, 2015). The increasing demands of the workforce require individuals to have not only the core academics or technical skills, but also nonacademic skills including time management, goal setting, and self-awareness (Conley, 2012).

What to Address in the Transition IEP

The transition planning process involves a team to plan and develop an effective annual educational program to increase knowledge and skills necessary for the student to succeed in adult life. This process is ongoing and occurs in three major phases: 1) planning and development, 2) implementation, and 3) outcome evaluation. In planning for the educational program for these students, focus should be on their strengths and needs in adult life domains. Key adult life domains associated with transition planning include employment/ career development, postsecondary education or training, independent living, and community participation. It is important to keep in mind that every student is unique, and every transition IEP must be individualized to the student. The following elements should be addressed in the program.

Student Vision

Effective transition planning is student-centered and student driven. It begins with the student's vision for the future in the areas of employment, education and training, and independent living. When the student and IEP team need additional information to cultivate the student's vision for life after high school, identifying and gathering age-appropriate transition assessments to assist in clarifying and developing a vision based on strengths and interests is necessary.

Age-Appropriate Transition Assessment

Age-appropriate transition assessment is the element of the planning process that lays the foundation for developing the transition IEP. It involves the assessment and identification of students' strengths, preferences, interests, and needs through informal and formal methods across various environments.

Measurable Postsecondary Goals

An inspection of a student's future desires, interests, and preferences should lead to the creation of measurable postschool goals related to adult life. These goals state what the student plans to do upon exiting from secondary education and are required in the areas of employment, education and training, and independent living where appropriate. Here are some examples:

- **Employment**: After high school, Austin will obtain full-time supported employment in a hospital setting.
- **Postsecondary education**: After high school, Ellen will attend the local community college full-time to obtain an associate's degree in business.
- **Independent living**: After high school, Gareth will live in a college dorm or share an off-campus apartment with friends.

Present Level of Performance

In addition to measurable postsecondary goals, IDEA requires that each IEP include a measure and statement of the student's current level of academic and functional performance. Information on the student's present level of performance is obtained through reviewing previous IEPs and using a variety of assessments that are designed to reveal the student's current (within one year) abilities and support needs. This summary is presented during the IEP meeting, discussed, and written into the student's plan.

Course of Study

Courses of study outline the requirements the student will need to complete in order to meet postsecondary goals. They include core academic classes required for graduation as well as electives, work-based learning experiences, and any other course opportunities that directly support the student's needs and post school vision.

Transition Services

Transition services are the activities that are planned, coordinated, and designed to improve the academic and functional achievement of the student to prepare for the transition to post-school life. These activities must be based on the student's needs, preferences, and interests and include classes, related services, work-based learning experiences, vocational evaluation, and linkages to other services that directly relate to the measurable postsecondary goals.

Dates for Implementation

It is important to establish a time frame to observe and measure a student's goals and objectives. Some teachers prefer to establish the dates when all activities will start and end, whereas others only indicate the approximate date for completing all steps.

Person(s) Responsible

The student's transition IEP should state the primary person responsible for overseeing implementation. Collaboration and teamwork play an important role in implementing the IEP, and every individual involved in providing services to the student should know and understand their responsibilities.

Summary of Performance

Before a student graduates from high school or turns 22, the local education agency has to provide the student with a summary of academic achievement and functional performance that includes recommendations on ways to meet postsecondary goals. This summary should be specific, meaningful, and address the student's academic and functional performance levels and transition needs at the time a student exits school.

Age of Majority

The student's transition IEP should include any rights that will transfer from the parent to the child when the child reaches the age of majority. At least one year prior to reaching this age, the transition IEP must include a statement that both the student and parent have been notified of this transfer and include any rights that will be removed from the parent to the student.

Organization and Time Frame

A student's transition IEP provides a framework for the team to identify, plan, implement, and evaluate activities that will help the student make a successful transition from school to adult life. Regardless of IEP format, some basic elements must be included, such as a long-range outcome or vision statement, age appropriate assessment, a summary of present level of performance, annual goals, steps needed to accomplish these goals, time frames, and responsible parties.

When to Begin Planning

As discussed previously, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that transition planning must begin no later than the student's 16th birthday. As we know, students are involved in a multitude of experiences and assessments during elementary and middle school leading up to the time for the development of a transition IEP. Planning for the future should be a focus for students early on in their education, and it needs to include supports and meaningful activities designed to assist them navigate their transition into adulthood.

Elements of Effective Transition Planning

Identify Different Types of Assessment

Deciding what to assess and how to collect and use data to plan transition are important steps in establishing meaningful postschool outcomes for all students. The focus of assessments is to provide information on the student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs as they relate to their postsecondary goals of education, training, employment, and independent living. Assessments should be both individualized and linked to specific postsecondary outcomes.

Assessments can be categorized as formal or informal. Typically, informal assessments are less structured and take less time to administer. Formal assessments typically involve standardized procedures and compare scores with other students. Both types of assessments measure student learning and achievement, chart progress, and are used to adjust learning.

Key Players on the Transition Team

Effective transition planning requires a collaborative and committed team of key players. At the center of the team are the student and one or both parents or guardians. Parents and guardians are integral members of the transition team since they can contribute essential information on strengths, preferences, interests, and support needs in both the home and community environments.

School personnel on the team include the student's special education teacher and a general educator if the student is in general education classes. A school district representative who is qualified to supervise or provide special education may also be required to attend team meetings.

The school must also bring in representatives from other agencies, such as vocational rehabilitation, to be part of the student's transition IEP meeting. Each organization will have its own unique roles, funding sources, and eligibility requirements and a key function of transition planning is to provide students, families, and service providers with information that will facilitate service use.

Ways to Involve the Student

IDEA mandates that transition-age students must be invited to attend transition IEP meetings. Ways to involve students in the transition planning process include:

- Inform students and families of the importance of participation and increase expectations for student participation.
- Involve students in planning the meeting and taking a leadership role in meetings.
- Teach IEP terminology, roles of participants, and ways to participate.
- Instruct students to be self-determined and to advocate for themselves.
- Teach students to evaluate progress towards IEP goal attainment.

Ways to Involve Families

Families often express concern regarding their participation in IEP meetings. To involve families in the transition IEP planning process:

- Use terms that are easily understood by the whole team, especially family members.
- Provide opportunities for family members to give input on what they see in the home and community.
- Inform family members of who is at the meeting and their role in the transition planning process.
- Provide an overview of what will happen during the meeting, so all members understand what will be discussed during the meeting.
- Be sensitive to the demands of families to meet work schedules and other commitments.

Conclusion

Transition planning is an ongoing, collaborative, results-oriented process that is based on students' individual needs, taking into consideration their strengths, preferences, and interests. This paper has emphasized the need for the process to be person-centered and for the planning to be shared by the entire IEP team. All members must share their expertise and work in partnership to build a coordinated set of activities and services that will help students develop the blueprint for life after high school and beyond.

References

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Conley, D. T. (2012). *A complete definition of college and career readiness*. Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub.L. No. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq

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