

## School Counselors & Transition Planning

### *Essential Questions & Expert Answers*

School counselors play a critical role in preparing students with disabilities for life after high school. In Virginia, counselors act as key connectors across education, employment, and adult services, ensuring that transition planning leads to real, measurable outcomes in adult life.

This guide answers common questions and provides practical, evidence-based strategies aligned with predictors of post-school success.

*How can school counselors ensure students with IDD have access to meaningful career exploration and work-based learning experiences?*

Career development needs to go beyond awareness activities and provide progressive, real-world experiences that build skills, confidence, and direction over time. School counselors play a central role in coordinating these opportunities and ensuring they are aligned with student goals.

Consider:

- Sequencing experiences (career awareness → exploration → work-based learning → paid employment)
- Ensuring experiences occur in community settings, not just school-based environments
- Collaborating with employers to create meaningful roles with clear expectations

#### Resources

- ▶ [Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities](#)
- ▶ [Career Planning Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Supporting Youth with Disabilities](#)

- Embedding reflection so students can identify preferences, strengths, and needs

## *How can school counselors support authentic student involvement in the IEP and transition planning process?*

Authentic involvement requires explicit instruction and preparation. Students are not naturally equipped to participate in meetings—they must be taught how.

School counselors can help shift IEP meetings from adult-driven conversations to student-centered planning experiences.

Consider:

- Teaching students how to describe their strengths, interests, and goals
- Practicing participation through role-play or pre-meeting preparation
- Using structured tools (guided questions, visuals, templates)
- Gradually increasing student leadership over time

Students should move from passive participation to actively contributing and leading discussions about their future.

## *How do school counselors promote self-determination and decision-making?*

Self-determination develops when students are given frequent, meaningful opportunities to make decisions and experience outcomes. Counselors play a key role in embedding decision-making across daily school experiences, not just transition planning.

Consider:

- Embedding choice into course selection, career pathways, and daily routines
- Teaching students how to weigh options and consider consequences
- Supporting students in communicating preferences, even when they differ from adults
- Creating safe opportunities for students to make mistakes and learn

Self-determination is strengthened when students are supported to take ownership of their goals and actions.

### **Resource**

- ▶ [Self-Determination in Action: At Home, at School, and in the Community](#)

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## *How can school counselors effectively engage families in transition planning?*

Families play an important role in supporting transition planning, independence, and long-term adult outcomes, but they may not always be familiar with adult service systems or available supports. Counselors help bridge this gap by making information clear, accessible, and ongoing.

Consider:

- Breaking down complex systems like DARS and Pre-ETS into understandable steps
- Providing information early and revisiting it often
- Offering multiple ways to engage (meetings, written materials, conversations)
- Recognizing and respecting family priorities, culture, and expectations

Family engagement is most effective when it is consistent, proactive, and collaborative.

### **Resource**

- ▶ [CTI Family Engagement Webpage](#)

## *How do school counselors coordinate with adult service agencies?*

Strong transition outcomes require intentional alignment between school and adult systems.

Counselors serve as facilitators who ensure students do not experience a gap in services after graduation.

Consider

- Initiating referrals to DARS and other agencies early (not in the final year)
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities across team members
- Supporting students and families in understanding eligibility and services
- Facilitating communication between school staff and agency partner

Effective collaboration results in a warm handoff, not a disconnect at exit.

### **Resources**

- ▶ [Interagency Collaboration Assessment](#)
- ▶ [Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services \(DARS\)](#)

### *How do school counselors support inclusion in general education and school activities?*

Inclusion provides access to academic content, social networks, and real-world expectations, all of which are critical for adult success. Counselors can advocate for inclusion that is meaningful and aligned with student goals.

Consider:

- Ensuring access to general education courses when appropriate
- Promoting participation in electives, clubs, and extracurriculars
- Supporting peer interaction and social skill development
- Aligning inclusion decisions with long-term employment and community outcomes

Inclusion should be viewed as a pathway to adult life, not just a placement decision.

### *How do school counselors align a student's program of study with postsecondary goals?*

A student's course of study should function as a roadmap to adult outcomes, not just a path to graduation. Counselors ensure that academic and elective choices are intentional and aligned with the student's future.

Consider

- Connecting coursework to career interests and skill development
- Integrating career and technical education when appropriate
- Planning intentionally for Applied Studies diploma pathways
- Adjusting plans as student goals evolve over time

Every course should answer the question:

"How does this prepare the student for life after high school?"

#### **Resource**

- ▶ [Family Engagement and Secondary Transition: Collaboration & Preparation](#)

#### **Resources**

- ▶ [Roles in Career Planning](#)
- ▶ [Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs](#)

## *How do school counselors use transition assessment to guide planning?*

Transition assessment is most effective when it is ongoing, functional, and directly tied to decision-making.

Counselors help ensure that assessment results are actively used to shape goals and services.

Consider:

- Using multiple sources of data (formal, informal, observation, real-world performance)
- Assessing across environments (school, home, community)
- Translating results into specific, measurable IEP goals
- Revisiting data regularly to adjust supports and expectations

Assessment should answer:

“What does this student need next to move toward their goals?”

## *How do school counselors support students in obtaining paid employment before exiting high school?*

Paid work experiences provide students with skills, confidence, and employer expectations that cannot be replicated in classroom settings. Counselors can help prioritize and expand access to these opportunities.

Consider

- Starting with short-term experiences and building toward sustained employment
- Partnering with local businesses to create opportunities
- Addressing barriers such as transportation and scheduling
- Coordinating supports and gradually fading them over time

### **Resources**

- ▶ [Transition Assessment Process Guide](#)
- ▶ [Five Steps in the Transition Assessment Process](#)
- ▶ [Free Transition Assessments](#)

### **Resources**

- ▶ [Families' Role in Work-Based Learning Experiences](#)
- ▶ [Developing Work-Based Learning Internships](#)
- ▶ [Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities](#)

Paid employment should be viewed as a priority outcome, not an optional experience.

*How do school counselors ensure students leave high school with a clear plan for adult life?*

Students should exit with a plan that is specific, realistic, and understood by the student.

Counselors help ensure that planning translates into action.

Consider:

- Clearly identifying next steps in employment, education, and independent living
- Ensuring students can explain their own plan and supports
- Connecting students with adult services and community resources
- Teaching independent living, self-management, and problem-solving skills

### **Resources**

- ▶ [Centers for Independent Living](#)
- ▶ [Transition Tips: Enhancing Independent Living Skills at Home](#)
- ▶ [Transportation and Independent Living](#)
- ▶ [Virginia Centers for Independent Living](#)

A strong transition plan answers:  
“What happens the day after graduation?”