



# **Transition to Adulthood**

## **A Guide for Transition Age Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families**

### **Chapter One – Special Education in High School**

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Effective transition planning in high school is an essential part of helping young people with disabilities make a smooth transition to adulthood. The transition planning portion of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is an excellent tool for educating youth about the topics discussed in this guide and for connecting them to many of the related services. This chapter will discuss the rights of students with disabilities enrolled in public schools as they approach the end of their secondary education. It will also explain some of the ways in which the IEP team can help students make the most of the resources they have while still in high school in order to have an easier transition out of school and into adult life.

### **Transition Planning**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Pennsylvania's Special Education Law, sometimes referred to as "Chapter 14", require public schools to help students with disabilities succeed while in school and prepare them for life after graduation. As part of this responsibility, schools work with families to create an IEP laying out the student's educational program, including any special support services he or she may need to successfully transition to life after high school.

Starting at least in the school year when you will turn 14, your IEP needs to include a transition plan. Your IEP team – including you – must create a transition plan to help you set and reach goals for after high school, such as further education, employment, and independent living. This transition plan must be based on your needs and interests, and it must be updated every year. In most cases, it is a good idea to review and update it more frequently, such as every semester or quarter. Remember, you and your parents can request an IEP meeting at any time.

Once transition planning becomes part of your IEP meetings, your school must invite you to participate. It is very helpful to have you at these meetings because you are the one who knows the most about your goals and interests. You are not required to attend, though. If you don't feel comfortable going to your IEP meeting, there are other ways for you to

participate, such as writing down some of the things you want from your transition plan and sending this note to the meeting with your parents.

Your IEP meeting is a great opportunity to practice self-advocacy skills, which will be essential in all areas of life after high school. Your school should help you learn self-advocacy skills, and training in this area can even be a part of your transition plan. Regardless of whether you attend the meeting, your IEP team must gather information about your strengths, interests, and preferences and consider them while completing the transition plan.

Creating a good transition plan takes several steps. There are a lot of ideas about the best way to write a transition plan, but all transition planning should involve the following components:

1. Your transition plan must be based on **age-appropriate transition assessments**. Assessments are required by law and are essential to creating an effective transition plan. Your school must perform assessments in the areas of training, education, employment, and, if appropriate for you, independent living skills. The IEP team should use a variety of assessments, both formal and informal.

To help set your transition goals, your IEP team should use assessments to learn about your interests. Some examples of these assessments are:

- Interest inventories
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Online assessments
- Direct observation

To help determine what transition services you need, your IEP team should use assessments related to aptitudes, abilities, and skills. These will help identify gaps between your current abilities and the skills you will need to reach your goals. These assessments can cover numerous areas, such as:

- Academic skills
- Self-determination
- Adaptive behavior and independent living skills
- Various relevant aptitudes (such as artistic ability, clerical ability, and music ability)

There is no set list of assessments that you can or should use, and there is no real definition of exactly what a transition assessment should look like. Your IEP team will select assessments for you based on your specific needs, but an interest inventory is a good place to start for any student, as it can help to shape your goals and determine what other assessments you might need. There are many free interest assessments online. One example is the Department of Labor's Interest Profiler on its "My Next Move" website. You can use the Interest Profiler at <http://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip> to help you figure out some careers that might appeal to you.

Another helpful resource is the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center's "Age Appropriate Transition Assessment Toolkit", which provides sample lists of both formal and informal assessments in many of the different categories mentioned above. You can link to this Toolkit at <http://nsttac.org/content/age-appropriate-transition-assessment-toolkit-3rd-edition>.

2. As with any area of your IEP, your IEP team must set clear, **measurable post-secondary goals** for you. You will also set broader goals for your **post-school outcomes**. These two kinds of goals are described in more detail in the following paragraphs. You should take the lead role in setting goals in the areas of education and/or training, employment, and independent living skills. Sometimes a student's goals seem unrealistic to the rest of the IEP team (not every student can become a famous baseball player or movie star). You should have the final say in setting your goals, but let the rest of your IEP team help. If your goal seems unrealistic, try talking it through with the rest of your IEP team to figure out the interests and skills that led you to that goal. Maybe your IEP team can suggest other goals that would fit the same criteria. But "realistic goals" don't have to be small or easy. Your IEP team should have high expectations for you and should work under the belief that,

with the right supports and services, you can achieve your goals.

Your transition plan should include two kinds of goals. First, you will set broad, long-term goals for your post-school outcomes. You will work to achieve these goals throughout high school and after graduation. Your transition plan must include goals in both education and employment, or one goal that fits both areas. Whether your IEP team sets goals related to independent living skills will depend on your individual needs.

Your desired post-school outcomes may not start out very specific. Few students know at age 14 exactly what they want to do after high school! For example, an early goal in the area of employment might be, “Jonathan will have a job that uses his strong math skills and his interest in technology.” This goal doesn’t say what specific job Jonathan wants, but it gives enough information to write a transition plan outlining the type of instruction and services he will need to prepare for the kind of job he wants. Since your transition plan must be reviewed and updated every year, your goals can evolve over time.

Of course, schools are not responsible for making sure you achieve these post-school outcomes – you’ll be working on these long after you leave high school. However, your school is responsible for making sure you have the skills and knowledge you need to reach these goals, so you will also set focused, measurable goals that you will work on during school to prepare you to reach your post-school outcomes. These goals are similar to the measurable annual goals you have always had in your IEP. For each post-school outcome, your IEP team will identify skills you need to develop and will create a measurable goal(s) related to these skills. Each goal will include an objective, as well as criteria for measuring whether you have achieved your objective. Each goal should be broken down into benchmarks with detailed explanations of how your achievements will be measured and tracked.

To help clarify what your transition plan might look like, below are some examples of goals you might have:

**Post-school outcome:** After graduation, Sarah will enroll in a culinary arts

program at a community college.

**Measurable post-secondary goal:** When given a 10-ingredient recipe, Sarah will correctly measure all ingredients in 8 out of 10 trials.

**Post-school outcome:** Craig will work part-time in a local bookstore with necessary supports.

**Measurable post-secondary goal:** Craig will be able to describe his disability and list three accommodations that would help support him in his work.

**Post-school outcome:** Lisa will live independently in an apartment with a roommate.

**Measurable post-secondary goal:** Lisa will open a checking account and accurately track her income and expenditures over the course of one month.

**A note about employment goals:** The IDEA requires that schools meet a student's educational needs in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible for that student. This requirement includes work placements that are part of a student's IEP. This means that whenever possible, a student must be placed in a job with peers without disabilities and be given the supports and services he or she needs to succeed there. In many cases, IEP teams decide that segregated employment, or a "sheltered workshop," is an appropriate post-secondary goal for a student, but this restrictive option is rarely necessary. Sheltered workshops employ individuals with disabilities and are allowed to pay far below minimum wage. Students who go from school to segregated employment often find themselves "trapped" without the skills and supports needed to move into more fulfilling work. Students should understand that supports are available to help them succeed in competitive, integrated employment. If you would like to work after high school, make sure that your IEP team considers all your options instead of automatically choosing segregated employment.

**3. Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance** must be documented in your transition plan. This section should include data from your age-appropriate transition assessments. It should describe your current levels of achievement as they relate to your transition goals.

If applicable, this section of the transition plan should also be used to explain why your IEP team chose not to set a goal in any of the three post-secondary goal areas. For example, if your IEP team has not set a goal in independent living, this section should contain data demonstrating that your skills are currently age-appropriate and you don't need specific activities during high school to develop these skills further.

4. Finally, the transition plan must describe, in detail, the **transition services, including the course of study**, you will receive in order to achieve your post-secondary goals. This section must include who is responsible for each service – which may include outside agencies and you or your family – and when it will happen. Your school must invite to your IEP meeting (with your parent's consent) any outside agencies that may be responsible for providing one or more of your transition services. It may be helpful to have representatives present from a variety of outside agencies, including post-secondary education, vocational rehabilitation services, centers for independent living, and vocational training. The school is not responsible for ensuring that outside agencies fulfill their commitments. However, if an outside agency fails to provide a transition service listed in your IEP, your school must find other ways for you to meet your transition goals.

Many transition services may take place outside of the classroom. If you are concerned about the idea of staying in high school past age 18, you can ask to have opportunities for community-based learning, job opportunities, and classes at the local community college, including vocational courses.

One good example of a college-based transition program for young adults who are 18 - 26 years old with intellectual or other developmental disabilities, is the Career and Independent Living and Learning Studies ("CILLS") Program at East Stroudsburg University (ESU). The CILLS Program is a non-degree, full-time, three-year certificate program that promotes self-advocacy and utilizes mentors and peer supports to accommodate the different learning abilities of its participants. The CILLS Program activities include personal development situations and academic enrichment, along with opportunities to develop essential skills for independent living and future employment. If you are interested in learning

more about the CILLS Program, contact ESU's Special Education and Rehabilitation Department at 570-422-3558 and/or visit - [http://www4.esu.edu/academics/departments/special\\_education\\_rehabilitation/career\\_independent\\_living\\_learning\\_studies.cfm](http://www4.esu.edu/academics/departments/special_education_rehabilitation/career_independent_living_learning_studies.cfm).

Another good example of a transition program that is designed for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are still in high school is the Project SEARCH High School Transition Program ("Project SEARCH"). Project SEARCH is a business-led, one year, school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace. The goal for each student is competitive employment and the program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills to help participants make successful transitions from school to a productive adult life. If you are interested in learning more about Project SEARCH, including finding a Project SEARCH Program in your area, visit - <http://www.projectsearch.us/OurPROGRAM/HighSchoolTransition.aspx>.

These kinds of college-based and workplace-based transition services and programs, especially during the time after your senior year, may help keep your interest. Remember that, even though you are remaining in high school, you are still transitioning into adulthood along with your peers.

Transition services should include the following five areas: instruction, related services, community experiences, employment and other post-school objectives, and daily living skills. If your IEP team determines that you don't need any services in a particular area, your team should put a statement in your IEP explaining why.

Every student has unique needs, so every IEP will have a unique set of transition services. But there are two really important transition services that every IEP team should consider: registering to vote and getting referred to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR).

**Registering to vote:** In Pennsylvania, at any IEP meeting when you are 17 or older, your IEP team must discuss whether you and your parents want voter registration to be one of your goals. If you decide that you do, the team must set out when, where, and how you will register. All students

must be given the option to register at school during the school day, with assistance from designated school officials. The school officials will then transmit the completed voter registration forms to the appropriate voter registration office. You and your parents may also choose to register to vote outside of the school setting, or may decline to register at all. Voter registration must be discussed annually, in case it needs to be renewed or changed for any reason. Your IEP team should not discuss political party affiliation or your political views, unless there is a specific reason to do so, such as if you want to volunteer with a political campaign as one of your transition activities.

**Referrals to OVR:** The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) helps individuals with disabilities reach their employment and education goals. If you work with OVR, you will set a career goal, which might include going to college, and OVR will provide you with services to help you work toward it. Some available services include counseling, job assessments, training and education, job placement, and other support services you may need to help you be independent. OVR may even be able to help you pay for college. The services you get will be based on your needs. For more information on how to qualify for services from OVR, refer to “Chapter 4: Employment” of this guide, beginning on page 48.

## **Other Transition Services**

Below are several examples of other transition services. This is not a complete list of available services. Your IEP team should think thoroughly and creatively to find the right transition services for you.

### **1. Instruction**

- Opportunities to learn and practice self-advocacy skills
- Classes needed to graduate and to get into college
- Practical reading instruction, such as reading employment training materials and prescription bottles
- Practical math instruction, such as understanding your utility bills and learning to use coupons
- Instruction on test-taking and note-taking skills

- College exploration or research
- Instruction on rights and responsibilities after high school

## **2. Related Services**

- Connecting to adult service providers
- Learning about and getting assistive technology
- Navigating the adult health care and mental health care systems
- Connecting to SSI, Medicaid, or other available government benefits

## **3. Community Experiences**

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- Registering to vote
- Obtaining a driver's license or state ID card
- Training on using public transportation
- Visiting or joining a community recreation center

## **4. Employment and Other Post-school Objectives**

- Job search strategies and assistance, including learning internet job search skills
- Interviewing skills
- Instruction on completing a job application and creating cover letters and resumes
- Connection to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Job shadowing or work placement
- Developing job skills
- Informational interviews allowing the student to meet with someone in his or her desired profession to ask questions about how to get the job the student wants

## **5. Daily Living Skills**

- Budget planning, including learning to read a pay stub, opening checking and savings accounts, and using online banking tools
- Refilling prescriptions

- Personal safety
- Living situations and housing options
- Computer skills
- Maintaining your house, including laundry, shopping, and cooking

In addition to your transition plan, your school must create a **Summary of Performance (SOP)** before you leave, to help guide you after your special education services end. Your school must create a SOP during the last year that you will be receiving special education services, regardless of whether you are graduating or “aging out” (turning 21 years old.) The SOP is a summary of your academic achievement and functional performance at that time, and it must include recommendations on how to help you reach your post-secondary goals. The SOP is not a part of your IEP, so your school does not need to hold an IEP meeting to create it, and no additional evaluations are required. The IDEA does not specify who needs to be involved in creating the SOP, but because of the information it requires, it should be created by members of your IEP team. When possible, you should be involved in creating the SOP, as you will have valuable input about the supports and services that have helped you during school and that may continue to help as you work toward your post-secondary goals.

Because the SOP provides you with a clear description of your goals and the services that can help you reach them, it can be a good tool as you transition to adulthood. However, it is important to remember that once you exit high school, the IDEA no longer applies. While the SOP may help provide documentation of your disability and give you ideas about possible accommodations you might need, it does not guarantee any supports or protections in post-secondary education, employment, or other adult services. The other chapters in this guide contain information on the laws governing these areas.

## **Graduation**

There are two ways for you to earn a regular diploma from your public school district or public charter school. One way to earn a diploma is by completing the required courses and credits for graduation. The other way is by completing your Individualized Education Program (IEP). Your IEP

team will decide which way is right for you. At the end of your 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, if you have not completed the goals in your IEP, you have the right to delay graduation and continue in school until you turn 21, whether or not you have completed the required courses and credits for graduation.

If you decide to continue in school after your 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, you are still allowed to walk in the graduation ceremony with your class, even if you will not be accepting a diploma. At the ceremony, you will get a certificate of attendance that recognizes your achievement, but you will not get a diploma. No one else has to know that you are not getting your diploma if you don't want them to. Your certificate of attendance does not disqualify you from continuing to receive special education services – only a regular diploma does that. When you do officially graduate, you will receive a regular diploma.

Unless you are illegally “forced” to graduate, which is discussed in more detail later in this section, you no longer have the right to attend public schools or receive special education services once you accept a diploma. The decision to graduate a student who receives special education services must be made by the IEP team, which includes you and your parents. If you and your parents don't think you should graduate, explain your reasoning at an IEP meeting and put your reasons in a letter to the district.

After your IEP meeting, if your school still thinks you should graduate, you and your family can disagree with this decision. The law considers graduation to be a “change in placement.” This means that when your school district proposes that you graduate with a regular diploma, they have to give you a Notice of Recommended Educational Placement (NOREP) informing you of that decision. A NOREP is a form that your school must give your parents when they want to change something about your IEP.

If you and your parents disagree with the school district's proposal that you should graduate, you can challenge the district's decision. There are two ways to do that:

- You can disagree with the NOREP and ask for mediation; or
- You can disagree with the NOREP and ask for a Due Process Hearing.

If you and your family are going to challenge the school district's decision that you graduate through mediation or a Due Process Hearing, you should indicate that on the NOREP and return a copy of the NOREP as soon as possible (within 10 days). You must also file your request for mediation or a Due Process Hearing with the Office for Dispute Resolution (ODR). These options are discussed in more detail in the next section on Dispute Resolution.

In some cases, a school may try to force a student with a disability to accept a diploma and pressure his/her parents to agree to a NOREP recommending graduation, even if the student is under 21 and has not yet attained his/her IEP goals. In these circumstances, a school may tell a family that "the school cannot teach anything more" to the student or the student "cannot learn anything else by staying in school." These tactics of "forcing" the student to graduate and accept a diploma may not prevent the family from challenging the graduation at a later time. Such a challenge, if successful, would allow the student to receive compensatory education services – whatever is needed for the student to work towards and attain his or her IEP goals – directly from the school district and/or services paid for by the district in an appropriate post-graduation setting.

If you believe that you were forced to accept a diploma and graduate from high school, and you would like to know more about your educational rights, please contact Disability Rights Pennsylvania (DRP) at 800-692-7443 (voice) or 877-375-7139 (TDD). The email address is: [intake@disabilityrightspa.org](mailto:intake@disabilityrightspa.org).

## **Dispute Resolution**

There are many people on an IEP team, so sometimes it's not easy to get everyone to agree on an appropriate IEP or placement. If you and your parents think you are not getting the services you need, there are several options for dispute resolution. Your parents can request any of these options at any time. For more information about any of these options,

contact the Office for Dispute Resolution (ODR) at (800) 222-3353 or visit ODR's website at <http://odr-pa.org/>.

While you are involved in the dispute resolution process, the school cannot change your placement or your services unless your parents agree to the change. This is because of a legal concept called "stay put" or "pendency" which means that you have the right to stay put in your current educational program until the dispute is over. For instance, if you and your family challenge the school district's decision that you graduate, you will be allowed to continue attending school until the dispute has been resolved.

**If you think there will be problems at the IEP meeting**, your parents can request a neutral IEP facilitator to sit in on the meeting. A facilitator can't make decisions about the IEP or order the school to do anything, but sometimes it helps to have a neutral third-party present to keep everyone on topic and make sure everyone gets heard. You can get a request form at <http://odr-pa.org/early-dispute-resolution/iep-facilitation/> or by calling ODR. The form needs to be signed by your parents and your school.

**If your school issues a NOREP that you and your parents don't agree with**, mediation is another option. Mediation is a free service offered by ODR, and it is less complicated than going to a Due Process Hearing. When your parents request mediation, ODR will assign a mediator who is trained to help your family and the school reach an agreement. The mediator does not work for you or for the school. He or she is a neutral person. In Pennsylvania, neither your parents nor your school are allowed to bring an attorney to mediation.

Everything discussed at mediation is confidential, meaning that nobody at the meeting can tell other people what you said without your permission. This also means that your discussion during mediation can't be used as evidence if you later go to a Due Process Hearing. If your family and your school reach an agreement during mediation, it has to be put in writing and signed by both sides. Both sides are then required to follow the agreement.

If you want to go to mediation, you can get a request form at <http://odr->

[pa.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Mediation-Request-Form.pdf](http://odr-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Mediation-Request-Form.pdf) or by calling ODR. You can also request mediation by checking the mediation box on your NOREP and then contacting ODR.

**If there is little hope you can resolve your disagreement through mediation, or if mediation has already been unsuccessful,** you may consider requesting a Due Process Hearing. In a Due Process Hearing, your school and your family go in front of a Hearing Officer to explain what they want and why. Both sides will present evidence (including documents and testimony from witnesses). Both sides can also bring in experts (such as psychologists) to help present their case. Your parents can request a Due Process Hearing for almost any disagreement they have with the school district regarding your special education services. You do not need to have IEP facilitation or go to mediation before requesting a Due Process Hearing.

If your parents want to request a Due Process Hearing, they must do so within two years of the date they knew (or should have known) about the problem. They can start the process by checking the “Due Process Hearing” box on the NOREP, but they also have to write a letter – a “complaint” – and send copies to the school and ODR. They can write this letter themselves or ask an attorney or special education advocate to help them. Your parents don’t need to fill out any special form, but ODR has one they can use. It is available at <http://odr-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Due-Process-Request-Form.pdf>.

Regardless of whether your parents use ODR’s form, there are several things that must be included in the complaint (giving as much detail as possible): (1) the student’s name, school, and home address; (2) an explanation of the problem; and (3) suggestions for solving the problem – that is, what you want the school to do. Be sure to include any and all problems that you want the Hearing Officer to make a decision about. If you forget to include something in your complaint, you can’t bring it up in the Hearing.

Parents have the right to have an attorney represent them at the Due Process Hearing, but they will be responsible for paying for the attorney. This isn’t always possible. Parents are allowed to represent themselves at

Due Process Hearings, but it's a good idea to have someone help them if at all possible. The school will always have an attorney. If your parents can't afford an attorney or an advocate, they can sometimes get one for free from a local non-profit organization. Also, if your parents win the case, they may be able to collect attorney's fees from the school. This is not guaranteed, though, and your parents may still have to pay certain costs up front.

To give parents and school districts another option to resolve disagreements before going through a Due Process Hearing, ODR has instituted a relatively new process called an Evaluative Conciliation Conference (ECC). During the first phase, an ECC Consultant provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each side's position based on her understanding of the law and on her analysis of hearing decision and case law trends for similar types of issues. If both sides agree to engage in the second phase of ECC, the ECC Consultant will facilitate discussions with both sides which may result in a settlement agreement on some or all of the issues. The ECC process is voluntary, so each phase requires each side's willingness to participate in good faith with the ultimate goal of settling issues before litigation ensues. You can download the ECC Request Form at <http://odr-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/ECC-Request-Form.pdf>.

Requests for facilitation, mediation, ECC, or a Due Process Hearing can be sent to ODR by mail, email, or fax:

Fax: (717) 657-5983

Email: [odr@odr-pa.org](mailto:odr@odr-pa.org)

Address:

Pennsylvania's Office for Dispute Resolution 6340 Flank Drive  
Harrisburg, PA 17112-2764

## **Contact Information**

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