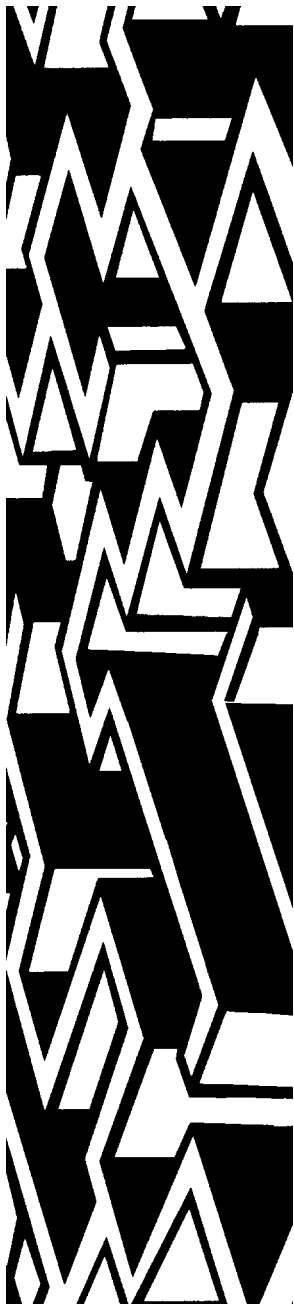


# Transition in an Era of Education Reform

*prepared by Carol Tashie  
Institute on Disability, University of New Hampshire*



**PEER**

High schools throughout the country are implementing standards-based education reform. As emphasized in the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities must have access to the same high standards and expectations that are set forth for other students. The IEPs of students with disabilities attending high school must reflect the general education curriculum.

At the same time, IDEA requires IEP teams to develop a statement of needed transition services for students with disabilities. "Transition" is generally thought of as the system of planning that supports the movement of a student with disabilities through and out of high school – the bridge between school and adulthood. The intent of such planning is to ensure that students leave school knowing who they are, what they want to do with their lives, and which supports they will need to accomplish their goals.

Beginning at age 14 (or younger, if appropriate), IEPs must include a statement of

the student's transition services needs, focusing on the student's course of study. Beginning at age 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team), IEPs must also include a statement of needed transition services for the student, including, if appropriate, a statement of the other agencies responsible for transition services or any needed linkages.

IDEA defines transition services as a "coordinated set of activities for a student" that:

- "(A) is designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;
- "(B) is based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests; and
- "(C) includes instruction, related services, community





experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.”<sup>1</sup>

In light of this requirement, high schools are developing systems of “transition” for students with disabilities – systems that support students with disabilities during and after high school. Ironically, at the same time, many high schools are developing systems to assist students without disabilities to develop pre- and post-graduation plans. Consequently, one group of students plans with the support of special educators; the other group of students plans with the support of guidance counselors. Two separate systems operate within one school system.

This traditional view of “transition” which in effect creates a separate, post-school planning process for students with disabilities, works at cross purposes with the goals of school reform. At a time when schools are being called upon to include students with disabilities in standards-based education reform, transition planning has frequently been used to steer students away from the regular education curriculum, toward developing goals which are not focused on meeting high academic standards and graduation with a regular high school diploma. If transition of students with disabilities is viewed separately from “transition” (or graduation) for students without disabilities, it will become virtually impossible to appropriately include students with disabilities in standards-based education reform.

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### **How transition has limited participation of students with disabilities in standards-based education reform**

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Parents Engaged in  
Education Reform

is a project of the  
**Federation for  
Children with  
Special Needs**

1135 Tremont Street  
Suite 420  
Boston, MA 02120

Web:  
[www.fcsn.org/peer](http://www.fcsn.org/peer)

Email:  
[peer@fcsn.org](mailto:peer@fcsn.org)

Voice/TTY:  
(617) 236-7210

Fax:  
(617) 572-2094

There are several ways that the traditional view of “transition” for students with disabilities has limited participation of students with disabilities in regular education curriculum and standards.

First, many high school students with disabilities are not included in the typical school experience – regular classes, extracurricular activities, and graduation planning. They are not supported to be fully participating and valued members in the typical experiences and classes that can assist them in developing their future goals.

Many students with disabilities progress through their school careers spending less time in the school building with their peers and more time in the community. This practice not only prevents students with disabilities from taking a full schedule of regular education classes, it isolates them from the very peer group they need to be successful now and as they enter the world of adulthood. It also serves to negate the valuable learning – academic, life skills, and social – that occurs for all students in these regular classes.

Secondly, the traditional “transition” process tends to perpetuate the notion that “special” paid people are the only ones who can

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<sup>1</sup> 20 U.S.C. 1401(30).

support students in school, at home, in the community, or on the job. Many professionals see “transition” as something that happens to students with disabilities to help them move from special education into the world of adult services. Depending on the community, this can mean transitioning from “school to work” or “school to sheltered work” or “school to day-habilitation” or even “school to waiting list for services.”

Third, only students with disabilities “transition,” all other students “graduate.” This system itself implies a separation between students with and without disabilities. With a strong emphasis on the merger of the separate systems of education (regular and special), it seems counterproductive to maintain, or develop, a separate system of “transition.”

When viewing students with disabilities as fully included members of the whole

community, it becomes clear that “transition” must fit into our notion about quality inclusive education for all. Questions such as, “How do students learn to make good decisions and good choices? How do they select the courses that they’ll need to prepare them for life after graduation? What are the opportunities and connections they take advantage of outside of school that will help them be successful after they graduate and move into adulthood?” must guide the process for supporting students with disabilities throughout their school career and into adulthood. Efforts must not be targeted at developing a different, special system of high school education and “transition” for students with disabilities, but rather on making the achievement of high standards and the graduation planning process open and meaningful to all students.



## **How transition can be structured to support participation in standards-based education reform**

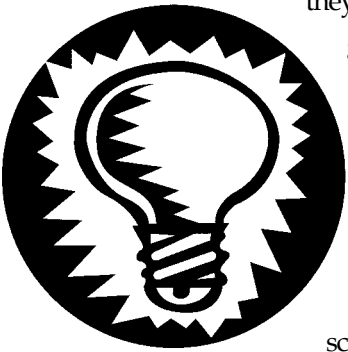
Although the intent of transition is a positive one, it is clear that the practices often limit opportunities to achieve the high standards set for all students. In order to move beyond separate planning processes for students with and without disabilities, the following changes must occur:

- Appropriate inclusion of all students,
- Changes in the roles of professionals and paraprofessionals,

- Adoption of the typical educational timetable,
- Graduation as an outcome for all students,
- Flexibility in supports beyond graduation.

### **Appropriate Inclusion**

There are numerous benefits of including students with disabilities in regular education. When students with disabilities are educated in general education classes,



they can gain skills and knowledge that will guide them in their present and future decisions. They are able to focus on literacy skills and academic learning. They have effective role models for learning and social interactions. They gain a vast array of information to guide future decisionmaking. High school students who choose which courses to take, which areas of study to pursue, and which extracurricular activities to engage in are better able to make informed decisions about their future life choices.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in a high school can be an impetus for change in

the way the school addresses the issues of career and future planning. For students with disabilities, the notion of school-supported career planning is not new. IDEA mandates such a process. However, schools truly committed to appropriately including children with disabilities reject the notion of separate planning strategies for students with disabilities. They recognize that systems must be developed that support all students to plan for their futures. Therefore, these schools have begun to develop schoolwide career- and life-planning processes for all students. These efforts can also be supported by School-to-Work-Act programs.<sup>2</sup>

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### **Job roles will need to change**

Changing the perspective about high school education and the “transition/graduation” process requires a change in some of the ways that people have traditionally viewed their job roles and responsibilities. A shift from a model of direct professional or paraprofessional support to a model of encouraging and nurturing natural supports in the school and community is essential. (This model can also be supported by programs

provided pursuant to the School-to-Work Opportunities Act.) School and community members must provide support to students with disabilities in much the same ways that support is provided to others — employers to new workers, churches and service organizations to new community residents, and so forth. In addition, the hours that school personnel work may need to change in order to support students beyond the school day.

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### **The educational timetable must also change**

Many states, at their discretion, choose to provide special education services to students with disabilities beyond age 18. For these states, the educational timetable must also change. The traditional way of educating students with disabilities was full-time

in the school building through elementary school, job shadowing and community-based instruction through middle and high

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<sup>2</sup> See the *PEER Information Brief* “School-to-Work Opportunities Act: A Source for Quality Transition Programs.”

school, development of a job by the age of 20, and finally, “transition” compressed into the last few months of school.

To accompany and guide the new vision of graduation planning, a new timetable — a typical educational timetable — must be embraced. Typical students go through their high school experience — freshman, sophomore, junior, senior — and then they graduate into the world of adulthood. For many students with disabilities, the timetable has been quite different. A student with disabilities may repeat his/her senior year two or three times in order to

“exit” school at age 22 years.

It is essential that students with disabilities (who, in some states, are eligible for educational services through or beyond the age of 22) progress through high school in the same way as typical students. Moving through the grades, taking required courses, choosing electives, participating in extra-curricular activities, and celebrating the end of their high school career upon completion of their (first and only) senior year is important for all students.

## **Graduation**

In most states, a student’s eligibility for special education services and supports ends upon receipt of a standard regular high school diploma. For this, and other reasons, many schools have presented students with disabilities with alternative diplomas or certificates of completion (or in the words of one parent, “a certificate of occupancy”) in order to continue services in states that provide special education services through the age of 21 or 22 years, or beyond.

Today, schools and communities that embrace the typical timetable of education for students with disabilities are struggling to match regulations with effective education. These schools have acknowledged the need for a compromise until policy catches up with practice. They believe that support to young adults must continue after the formal graduation ceremony (after senior

year) to young adults in jobs, colleges, technical schools, adult education classes, community activities, and so forth. In many of these schools, students with disabilities participate in all of the ceremonies and activities of senior year, including graduation, but do not receive their standard regular diploma until the age of 21 or 22 years. While this compromise is not ideal, schools and communities recognize the need to move forward with practice as one way of changing policy and regulations.

It is crucial to address how students over the age of 18 are supported. If students are to be appropriately included in the typical high school curriculum through the completion of their senior year, schools could then provide “post-senior year” support to these young adults in the community — not in high school. The old practice of





keeping students with disabilities in the high school building long after their same age peers have gone does not support the values of appropriate inclusion. Therefore, there must be a re-conceptualization of the supports and experiences for young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 or 22 to ensure appropriate inclusion and participation in community, work, recreation, and post-secondary education.

And after graduation? Typical students make a variety of choices. They go to college part time or full time, they work part time or full time, they live at home or find an apartment with a roommate. Students with disabilities need to have the same choices. School districts must work in close collaboration with the young adult and his/her family, and with employers, college officials, and community organizations to determine what supports will be needed to assist the individual in achieving his/her goals and dreams.

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