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NeMTSS Research Brief

Postsecondary Transition Planning

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Postsecondary Transition Planning: An NeMTSS Research Brief

Key Points:

- Postsecondary transition planning prepares students—especially those with disabilities—for life after high school, including college, employment, independent living, and community participation.

- Schools can increase student's preparedness for postsecondary life by offering vocational instruction and opportunities to practice self-determination skills in the classroom and community.

- Schools must begin incorporating transition services and components into a student's IEP as early as age 14 that include measurable goals, assessments, and agency collaboration, to ensure students successfully move from school to adult life.

What is Postsecondary Transition Planning?

Postsecondary transition planning are efforts by school staff to prepare students for positive postsecondary outcomes including education and employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Doing so may also include connecting students and their families to community services and support, as well as planning for housing, transportation, and other needs. Rather than only providing an isolated or separate program on post-secondary transition, schools should emphasize relevant courses and transition-focused education throughout the school day (Test et al., 2009). Transition-focused education highlights transition planning as a foundation of education that guides all educational programs rather than an add-on activity (Kohler & Field, 2003). Utilizing academic, career, and extracurricular instruction, along with participation in local activities, transition-focused education supports students in achieving successful adult outcomes and increases high school completion rates (Test et al., 2009).

Why is Postsecondary Transition Planning Important?

Postsecondary transition planning can serve dual purposes by motivating students to complete high school while also preparing them for their future. Many studies have shown the necessity of at least a high school diploma for successful future employment and positive financial opportunities (Chan et al., 2003). The need for postsecondary education has dramatically increased over the last thirty years. In 2021, approximately 68% of jobs in the United States had some sort of postsecondary education or training (e.g., associate's degree, bachelor's degree; Carnevale et al., 2024). By the year 2031, it is projected that 72% of jobs will require postsecondary education and/or training (Carnevale et al., 2024). Postsecondary transition planning is especially critical for students with disabilities, as 28% of students with disabilities do not graduate high school, increasing their likelihood of unemployment or receiving lower wages (Test et al., 2009). Additional risk-factors for dropping out of school and involvement in juvenile detention/youth incarceration include poor academic records, a family history of school drop-out, high mobility rates, demographic variables (e.g. ethnicity and

socioeconomic status) and single-parent homes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, Test et al., 2009; Thornberry et al., 1991). Students from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic underrepresented groups have lower rates of school completion, post-school employment, and participation in postsecondary education (Benz et al., 2004). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are also less likely to attend four-year colleges or universities than students from middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds (Walpole, 2003). Effective transition practices could be utilized with these groups to increase high school graduation and encourage enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education.

Effective Transition Practices

Effective transition-focused education practices should be employed to assist students, in both general and special education settings, in successfully completing high school and preparing them for their next steps in life. High school completion and postsecondary success should be the goal for every student, and earning credits alone is not enough to ensure success after graduation. Helping students think about their future is an imperative step in motivating them to engage in the classroom, complete high school, and plan for their future. Statistically, students who received more community-based instruction, vocational instruction, money handling instruction, and the opportunity to choose their classes were more likely to complete high school than those who did not (Test et al., 2009). This is especially true for students with disabilities (Trainor et al., 2016). Researchers have suggested the following in-school predictors of postschool success are associated with greater student retention and success while in high school and predict better employment, education, and independent living outcomes after secondary completion (Benz et al., 2004; Mazzotti et al., 2021):

Academic & Career Preparation	
Career Awareness	Teaching students about career options, pathways, and skills needed for different jobs.
Career Technical Education	Participation in vocational or technical programs that prepare students with work skills.
Occupational Courses	Enrollment in job-specific classes or training such as carpentry, mechanics, or plumbing that leads to employment readiness.
Program of Study	A planned course sequence leading to postsecondary education or employment.
Technology Skills	Student's abilities to effectively use digital tools and resources for learning, communication, and problem-solving.
Work Study	School-supervised experiences that combine academic learning with paid/unpaid employment.
Paid Employment/ Work Experience	Participation in real jobs during or after school especially in the last two years of high school.
Community Experiences	Structured opportunities for students to engage in community settings (e.g., volunteering or job fairs).

Personal & Social Development	
Goal Setting	Helping students establish specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound objectives to guide their academic and personal growth.
Psychological Empowerment	Providing positive experiences that make students feel capable, motivated, and in control of their work or learning environment.
Self-determination/ Self-advocacy	Teaching students to make choices, advocate for themselves, and set personal goals through real-world experiences such as taking risks, making mistakes, evaluating results, reflection, and participating in the transition planning process.
Self-realization	Supporting students in fostering a deep understanding of themselves, including strengths, areas of growth, and values, that leads to a more fulfilling or purposeful life.
Social Skills	Instruction and opportunities to develop communication and relationship skills needed in work and life.
Youth Autonomy/ Decision Making	Opportunities for students to lead groups like in advocacy groups or student government to build independence.
Self-Care/ Independent Living Skills	Focusing on personal management like health and hygiene.
Travel Skills	Navigational and safety awareness, planning, budgeting, communication, adaptability, and cultural awareness skills acquired for students to travel safely, independently, using various modes of transportation, and navigating different environments.

Support & Transition Services	
Exit Exam Requirements/High School Diploma Status	Support to meet diploma requirements or alternative pathways to graduation.
Inclusion in General Education	Receiving educational opportunities alongside peers without disabilities to increase access to academics and social networks.
Interagency Collaboration	Partnerships between schools, community agencies, two or four-year colleges, employment agencies, and families to support transitions.
Parent Expectations	Beliefs and hopes parents have for their child's future regarding academics, career, and overall well-being.
Parent Involvement	Active engagement of families in transition planning and support for postschool goals.
Student Support	Support networks through peer mentoring, tutoring, or staff guidance to help students reach goals.
Transition Program	Specialized programs or services that support students during the transition from secondary school to adulthood.

Schools may also prioritize direct, individualized tutoring and support to complete homework assignments, attend class, and stay focused on school, building student competency in functional academic skills (e.g., reading, math, writing, problem solving) and transition (e.g., money management, personal-social, career awareness, self-advocacy, goal setting) and graduation (Benz et al., 2004).

Taxonomy for Transition Programming

The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (updated from the 1996 Taxonomy for Transition Programming) is a comprehensive framework immersed with evidence-based promising practices designed to guide educators with supporting students with disabilities with post-secondary transitions (Kohler et al., 2016, 2017). This framework highlights five key areas for postsecondary transition planning: student-focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure (Test et al., 2009). Each of these areas plays an integral role in the ability of the student to transition effectively into his or her academic future, as well as helping educational teams to successfully prepare students for that transition while ensuring that all the pieces of the academic puzzle are working together to facilitate student success.

Student-Focused Planning

Student-focused planning is the participation of students in their own educational planning based on their post-secondary goals. It is important for educators to assist in developing the student's self-awareness to set goals, both short- and long-term. By practice and application of student-focused planning, students develop and strengthen their self-determination skills. For students to be successful in student-focused planning, they must be self-aware, share their awareness with others, and advocate for themselves. Student-focused planning includes reflecting both on when progress is made and when it is not (Kohler & Field, 2003). Student-focused strategies consist of student involvement in developing their IEP if applicable and participation in their postsecondary planning (Test et al., 2009).

Student development

Student development refers to life and employment skills instruction, career and vocational curricula, support services, assessment, and structured work experiences (Test et al., 2009). Studies show that a student's experience with career related work and fulfillment of self-identified transition goals were strongly linked to graduation and employment (Kohler & Field, 2003). Furthermore, research reveals that instruction in self-determination, self-advocacy, goal setting and attainment, problem solving, and leisure skills are essential to high school graduation.

Interagency and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Interagency collaboration stresses the involvement of various community contributors to improve educational outcomes for students. It includes having a collaborative framework and service delivery system that engages community organizations, agencies, and businesses. Collaboration between school and community agencies provides needed services and support to students and their families and delivers support to school staff from additional service providers. These collaborations have been found to reduce suspensions (Test et al., 2009). Moreover, interdisciplinary and integrated courses increase the

relevance of school for students and may decrease student dropout rates (Test et al., 2009).

Family involvement

Family involvement is imperative for ensuring success in nearly every area of education, including school completion. As such, empowering and encouraging families to advocate for their students is an important factor in dropout prevention. Also, meeting the family's needs by connecting them with appropriate external services and providing them with opportunities to be involved in their student's school life is significant for increasing the likelihood of high school graduation.

Program Structure

Program structure focuses on characteristics of school structures and policies that maintain transition-focused education for all students. It includes program characteristics, program evaluation, strategic planning, policies and procedures, resource development and allocation, and school climate (Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). Program structures can decrease student dropout rates when they provide flexible programming, allow for credit recovery, or use student academic performance, attendance, and behavioral data to establish a student's need for support through MTSS, PBIS, and universal screening (Test et al., 2009).

The dropout prevention strategies listed below are related to program structures and reflect student-centered services that focus on outcomes for students:

- Allow and encourage student participation in curricula and planning that will prepare them for their postsecondary goals.
- Support career development and transition planning beginning in the middle grades across general, vocational, and special education.
- Continually assess the needs regarding secondary programming.
- Engage in strategic planning regarding long-term outcome goals.
- Provide staff development activities.
- Provide services necessary to reduce school dropouts and human resource development in job development, program marketing, effective instruction, curriculum modifications, and progress monitoring.

Transition Planning Policies for Students with Disabilities

In addition to the five primary areas of transition planning introduced by Test et al. (2009), there are specific regulations for students with disabilities that must be considered and followed when transition planning for these students. Students with disabilities are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Schools are mandated by IDEA to provide students with disabilities with a plan meant to aid them in transitioning into life after secondary school (Trainor et al., 2016).

Under the requirements of IDEA 2004, by the age of 16 (or younger, if determined necessary by the IEP team), a student's IEP must contain a statement of needed transition services (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In Nebraska, students with disabilities, eligible for special education, ages 14-21, must have transition components in their IEP. Prior to age 14, transition plans may be included with student and parental/guardian

consent (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022). Transition components include (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022):

- Measurable Post-Secondary Goals (goals that capture a student's desired outcomes one year after graduation or exiting services related to training, education, employment, and independent living skills)
- Age-Appropriate Transition Assessments (tools like a student/parent structure transition interview, ESTR, TPI, or rating scales used to evaluate a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs related to their post-secondary goals)
- Annual Goals (statements that describe what a child with a disability can reasonably accomplish during a 12-month period in the child's special education program and address how they will access coursework to enable them to successfully pursue post-secondary goals)
- Related Services (supports needed for students to access work, education, and living supports)
- Course of Study (multi-year description of coursework through the projected exit year, designed to enable students to achieve desired post-school goals by completing their secondary and special education requirements)

Under IDEA, school districts must report data to the state for the statewide monitoring of Indicators 13 and 14 as well as on the district's annual performance reports (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022). Indicator 13 measures the percentage of youth aged 16 and older with IEPs that include appropriate measurable post-secondary goals that are annually updated based upon age-appropriate transition assessments, transition services, and annual IEP goals related to the student's transition services' needs (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)). Indicator 14 assess the percentage of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of post-secondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)).

School districts shall provide transition services based on individual student's needs, preferences, and interest that consist of a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation.

In addition, IDEA requires that a representative of any agency that will likely be responsible for providing or paying for transition services be present at IEP meetings; if these agencies fail to provide the intended services, the school must find alternative ways to meet the needs of the student. The student must also attend IEP meetings, under IDEA 2004 requirements (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). If the student cannot attend, the school must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the preferences and interests of the student are incorporated into the plan.

Rights of Students with Disabilities

Students are eligible for services provided under IDEA until they graduate with a regular diploma or exceed the age limit set forth by IDEA (21 years of age). Students receiving any diploma outside of the regular graduation diploma are still eligible to continue receiving services until a regular diploma is earned or the maximum age is reached (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). However, the student must be notified one year prior to reaching the

age of majority (18 in most states, 19 in Nebraska) of the changes that will occur once the student reaches that age. At this point, the student is presumed to be capable of making his/her own decisions regarding education, future expectations, and goals, and thus, must be informed that his/her rights under IDEA will be transferred from the parent(s)/ guardian(s) to the student. These rights include notification of meetings, notification and consent for evaluation, selection of participants who attend IEP meetings, and approval of the contents of the IEP (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Upon completion of a student earning their diploma or aging out of the school, the school district is responsible for inviting, with parental consent, a representative of any participating adult services agency to a student's IEP meeting. Adult services are services that are provided by an outside community agency, to either support a student after the student earns their diploma or the student ages out of school and begins to access their post-secondary goals. Collaboration between the school and adult services agency increases the student's likelihood of post-school success and post-secondary transition (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022).

Conclusion

Postsecondary transition planning is how schools assist students in preparing for postsecondary education or employment after high school. This vital educational component is required in IEPs for any student with disabilities, aged 14 and older in the state of Nebraska. Additionally, transition planning is helpful to any student who is at risk of dropping out or is uncertain about what they want to do after high school. There are several useful evidence-based transition practices, including the completion of vocational education coursework, involving students in their IEPs and/or transition planning process, and changing program structures to those that have proven to be effective in reducing post-secondary failure. Additionally, there are several areas of planning that need to be addressed to aid students in successfully completing school: student-focused planning, student development, interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, family involvement, and program structure. When these areas of planning are addressed, students who are transitioning out of high school, regardless of their disability status, have a better chance of success.

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