

Guiding Principles for Transition and Recommendations

These guiding principles and recommendations were compiled by parents and disability advocates who are committed to seeing better life outcomes for students with disabilities. Like the children on whose behalf they are written, these principles and recommendations are a work in progress. In collaboration with each other and other stakeholders, these parents and advocates will continue to refine their goals for transition planning for students with disabilities.

1: Working in competitive, integrated employment, with or without supports, must be the presumed post-school employment goal for students with disabilities.

Like many other states, Alabama is embarking on a new era in terms of how it conceptualizes employment for persons with disabilities: "Employment First" (EF). EF reflects the expectation that community-based, integrated employment, with wages at or above the minimum wage, should be the first and preferred option for individuals with disabilities. All regular or special education initiatives must be judged through an EF lens with the following general question being asked: how does a particular initiative support EF principles, expanding integrated employment outcomes for youth with disabilities regardless of students' levels of ability?

2: Youth with disabilities need more community learning time, not less; for older youth, community is their LRE.

The IDEA recognizes the importance of youth learning in natural environments when it includes, as part of its definition of transition services, "community experiences." 34 C.F.R. Section 300.43. Community learning provides opportunities for students to gain independent living skills, social skills, employment, and self-advocacy skills in real-life settings. As important, it fosters continued connections to a student's home community that will carry that student through to adulthood.

"I have taken to heart what someone once told me: what your child is doing on the last day of school is most likely what they will be doing for the rest of their life. The school has never had the highest expectations for my daughter. They can't get past her low IQ score, small stature and physical disabilities. Their transition goal for her was to live at home and work in a sheltered workshop. But she has a job that she secured herself, gets to herself, and has not had the benefit of any true support from the school. If she did, there is no telling what she could do! The schools need to have an "ah ha!" moment and see the potential in the students and truly offer individual education plans, not limit children to IEP drop-box choices!" — A Parent

In our work on behalf of students with disabilities over the years, we have seen fewer and fewer of them spending meaningful time in community learning -- whether it's for vocational or adult living skill development. Such cutbacks may be due to academic pressures placed on schools by, for instance, NCLB accountability measures; personnel cutbacks; transportation costs; and perceived liability issues. No matter: meaningful community-based teaching, as part of transition services, is vital for students with disabilities, particularly those with significant disabilities, to ensure successful transitions to adulthood.

“As a parent of a son who has cognitive challenges, he has to have the work component started early in order for him to be successful in his community. He spends time in a Career Prep Class learning, however, we have to make sure that he has hands-on experience and a lot of it. Students feel of a sense of belonging and that they have an important part to contribute to communities when they do community learning. I have observed my son during volunteer events just soar at a rate that we have not expected. In the community, we see the great potential, but behind closed doors, I have observed a sense of stagnant behavior. Being a part of the community is like a high for him. He displays a sense of empowerment.” – A Parent

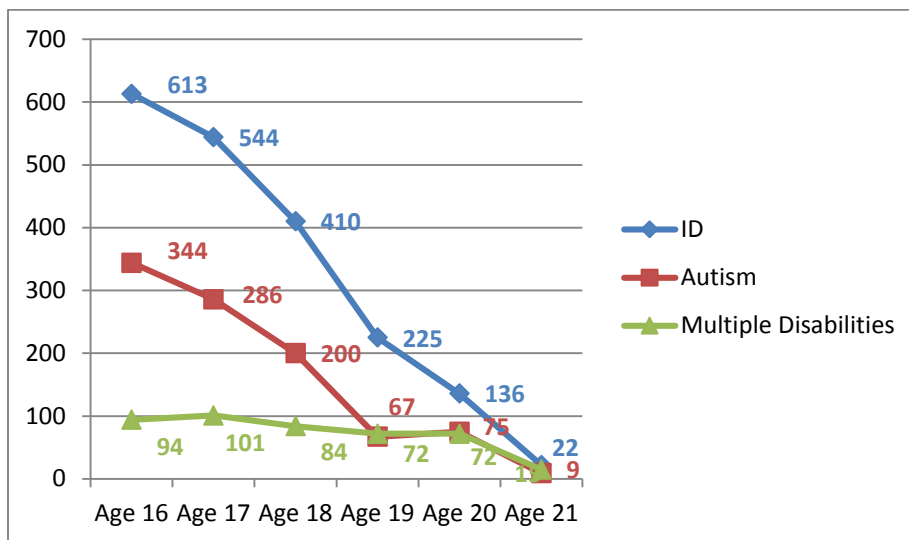
Being in the community is especially important for older youth (18-21 year old). Community settings and services should be the starting point for LRE discussions for older youth. After all, typically-developing youth have left school for further education or work in the community by the age of 18. Without rich community learning experiences, students with disabilities will have few opportunities to interact with same-age peers without disabilities in age-appropriate settings – the touchstone of the LRE mandate.

Having to do community work hours shouldn't be viewed as a burden to students but, rather, as an opportunity for them to be prepared for adult work and life. This is their learning mechanism. Research suggests the more frequently choice, exposure, and experiences are provided to students with a disability, the more successfully they transition into adulthood.

3: Too many students exit school prematurely to nothing; community experiences could encourage students to stay in school.

Keeping older students in school is another reason to encourage community learning. Below is a chart which represents the number of students, by age, with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), Autism, and Multiple Disabilities enrolled in Alabama's schools in 2013. Of the IDEA's thirteen disability categories, these are the three categories where it's likely that students would benefit from staying on past the typical 18 year old exit year. Granted, some students are prepared to graduate at age 18 and they leave with good plans in hand for adult education, work and community living. But too many are leaving before

their eligibility for services expires and when their needs suggest they should stay in school. What we hear from families is that many older students leave school before their final year of eligibility because they or their families are burned out. The students see their peers graduating and moving on to new lives in new environments and want that for themselves. And, they are frustrated by the thought of doing “more of the same” for the next three or four years. Individualized community-based work experiences could provide these older youth with a strong incentive to stay in school beyond the typical exit year. These students would then, when they finally exit school, be better prepared for adult living.



Students Eligible for Special Education Services under the Categories of ID, Autism, and Multiple Disabilities by Age in 2013
Alabama Child Count Data retrieved from http://web.alsde.edu/docs/documents/65/EDSERPR24_State_2013-2014.pdf

4: The ALSDE must hold schools to high standards and vigorously monitor them for outcomes and compliance; schools will only do the minimum required of them.

While we’d like to hope otherwise, too many schools will only do that which is required of them and for which they are held strictly accountable. The problems we see – both personally and professionally – include schools not doing individualized, student-driven planning. Locating and identifying appropriate employment for students, based on their interests, is not done with any vigor. Schools don’t provide students needed supports so work placements are successful. Schools struggle even more when it comes to providing such support to students pursuing the AAS/Certificate of Attendance - if those students are even offered the opportunity to experience community work experiences in the first place. Schools regularly ignore their

responsibility to transport a child to his work site when the work training is part of his IEP and is required to provide him FAPE.

5. Schools must do a better job meaningfully partnering with families and helping them create connections with other provider agencies.

While youth and families today – versus older generations – are likely to have more expansive goals for adulthood, many still are hampered by low expectations. Too many families don't understand their (or their children's) rights to services. This goes back to families' earliest interactions with their school systems and special education, as well as other child-serving systems. They are not consistently respected by the teams and providers that work with them and are overwhelmed by the many doors they have to knock on to get services for their children. Many families assume their adult children with significant disabilities will slide seamlessly into adult services. They believe that by virtue of the child's disability, he or she will be eligible for and entitled to adult services.

Recommendations

1. The ALSDE should rescind its decision to cut the number of required paid community work hours for "Essentials" students and retain the 270 hour requirement. These work hour requirements should be reflected in state regulations.
2. The ALSDE should amend state regulations to require that students pursuing a diploma via the Alternate Achievement Standards (AAS) Pathway (formerly known as Certificate of Attendance) complete 270 hours of community-based living skill/work/vocational learning, aligned with their IEP goals, prior to graduation.
3. The ALSDE should revise the state's electronic IEP template offerings for post-school outcomes. These pre-defined offerings stifle meaningful individualized discussion and planning in IEP teams; it is too easy for team members to simply cut and paste an item from the drop-down boxes into the IEP.¹ Especially troublesome in this new era of Employment First are the following post-school outcome choices: day/activity training as an employment outcome and living with parents as an independent living outcome. Delete these.
4. The ALSDE should amend state regulations to move the mandatory start age for transition planning back to 14 – where it was before the 2004 amendments to the IDEA.

¹ Much the same way the IEP teams tend to cut and paste Alabama Content Standards into IEPs – a discussion for another day.

5. In collaboration with stakeholders, including parents and consumer advocates, the ALSDE should refine its school monitoring mechanisms so that schools are held accountable for meaningful services, outcomes, and parent engagement. The ALSDE should incorporate the comprehensive NSTTAC I-13 checklist into its federally required monitoring of how schools implement the IDEA's transition planning requirements for students with disabilities.
6. The ALSDE should work with parents and disability advocates to enhance consumer stakeholder involvement. The ALSDE needs to reach out broadly to seek consumer partners for such groups as Special Education Advisory Panel and the Employment First Team State Leadership Mentoring Program Interagency Team. Consumer participants should hold a majority of seats on such groups and should be trained and supported so they can meaningfully participate in them.
7. The ALSDE should mandate person-centered planning for students with disabilities. This is especially important for AAS Pathway students. For these students, there should be meaningful collaboration with Department of Mental Health and other relevant partners on IEP Teams once the students enter high school.
8. All regular and special education initiatives should be judged for their potential impact on students with disabilities. So, for example, reforms in special education and career tech should be viewed through an EF lens with the following general question being asked: how does a particular initiative support EF principles, expanding integrated employment outcomes for youth with disabilities regardless of students' levels of ability?
9. The ALSDE should develop a specialist teacher endorsement in transition services and transition planning.

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