

4. EMERGING THEMES REGARDING THE IEP AND TRANSITION PLANNING PROCESSES

In the years since transition planning entered the special education lexicon, efforts related to policy, research, model demonstrations, personnel preparation, parent education, and student support have helped shape the implementation of the transition planning process in schools for students with disabilities (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004). NLTS2 has provided a national picture of transition planning, including variations in that planning for students who differ in disability and other characteristics. Four main themes emerge about the transition planning process from this national picture:

- The extent to which the expectations for the transition planning process that are embedded in law, regulation, and best practice are being met varies across the range of secondary-school-age students with disabilities.
- The transition planning process develops over time.
- Transition planning reflects the diversity of students' needs and abilities.
- The transition planning process differs for students with different household incomes and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

A Mixed Picture of Transition Planning

NLTS2 findings demonstrate that the basic requirement for transition planning is being met for many students with disabilities. Almost 90% of secondary school students in special education have transition planning under way on their behalf, with about two-thirds having begun the process by age 14 as required by IDEA '97. Furthermore, school staff report that about three-fourths of students, regardless of age, have a course of study identified that will help them achieve their transition goals.

Participants in transition planning. Federal law actively encourages parents' and students' participation in transition planning, and, in fact, the vast majority of students and their parents do participate. In addition, about two-thirds of participating parents report being satisfied with their level of participation. When students participate in transition planning, school staff report that more than half actively provide input to the process, and more than 1 in 10 take a leadership role. Yet there are about 6% of secondary school students with disabilities who reportedly do not attend IEP or transition planning meetings, and about 15% have parents who do not attend. Also, about one-third of participating parents report that the IEP and transition planning processes for their children do not provide as much opportunity for their involvement in decisions as they would like. Further, although the partnership between families and schools in setting goals for students is a reality for about one-third of students, parents report that the school mostly decides students' goals for almost half of students, and mostly parents and youth decide for one in five students.

In addition to students and their parents, special education teachers are part of the transition planning team for virtually all students with disabilities with transition planning efforts under way on their behalf; almost 60% have general education academic teachers, and 30% have general education vocational teachers on the team as well. However, two-thirds of students take

a general education academic class in a given semester, and 43% take a general education vocational class (Wagner, 2003), suggesting that some students who are taking general education classes do not have a general education teacher participating in their transition planning.

Despite the intention that families, schools, and other organizations collaborate in the process, transition planning involves primarily families and school staff; representatives of outside organizations are reported to participate actively in students' transition planning only infrequently. However, the efforts to contact outside organizations on behalf of students reported by school staff appear to match or even exceed the identified postschool service needs of some students. For example, 4% of students are reported to have mental health service needs identified for the period after high school, but 11% have had mental health service providers contacted on their behalf; 5% of students have supported living assistance identified as a service need, and contacts with providers of supervised residential support are reported for the same percentage. Less positively, schools do not appear to be doing all they can to help equip parents to access services for youth after high school; for even the oldest students with disabilities, schools have not provided one-fourth of parents with information about service options after high school.

Students' goals. Students' transition goals heavily emphasize employment and postsecondary education, and the transition planning process appropriately reflects those emphases. Postsecondary education accommodations are identified as postschool service needs for about half of youth, and vocational training or employment services are needs identified for more than one-third. Contacts with outside organizations as part of the transition planning process are made primarily with postsecondary education institutions and employers or vocational training programs.

Supports for transition. Regardless of who participates in the transition planning process and the contacts made on students' behalf, the process will be effective only if students' school programs help them achieve their transition goals. Although approximately 74% of students are reported to have IEPs that specify a course of study intended to help them meet their transition goals, school staff report that about 40% of students have programs that are very well suited to prepare them to meet their transition goals, with a similar percentage reported to have programs fairly well suited for that purpose. Most worrisome, is the 18% of secondary school students with disabilities who are reported to have programs that are only somewhat well suited or not at all well suited to meet their transition goals.

The Transition Planning Process Develops over Time

The transition planning process is not a uniform experience for students as they age; several aspects of the process are different for older students. Some of the differences, such as the role youth take in the process, may occur because of the increased maturity that comes with age. Other differences may reflect an increasing sense of urgency on everyone's part as high school exit approaches.

Initial transition planning. The mean age for the initiation of transition planning is 14.4 years. Three-fourths of 14-year-olds have had transition planning started, and the process is increasingly likely to occur for older students. By the time students are 17 or 18 years old, 96% have had transition planning, reflecting a 20-percentage point increase over 14-year-olds.

Participants in transition planning. Older students may possess greater responsibility, self-determination, skills, and clarity regarding postschool goals relative to younger peers, which may partly explain their greater likelihood of participating actively in transition planning. One-third of 14-year-old students with disabilities are present for transition planning but do not participate—a passive role taken by only one-fifth of 17- and 18-year-olds. Providing active input into planning increases for older students, with more than 60% of 17- and 18-year-olds providing input, compared with 45% of younger students. Student leadership of the transition planning process also is more likely among older students; more than 15% of 17- and 18-year olds take this role.

The participation of a variety of school staff in transition planning also differs for students of different ages. For example, although a special education teacher is almost always involved in the process, regardless of the student's age, the likelihood of general education vocational teachers' being involved is greater for older students; this difference reflects the increased likelihood of older students' taking vocational education courses (Wagner, 2003) and the approach of students' transition to postsecondary vocational training and employment. About 40% of 17- and 18-year-old students have a general education vocational teacher involved in their transition planning, twice as many as among 14-year-olds.

Consistent with the increasing emphasis on vocational goals and services for older students, the participation of a state VR counselor is more common for older students. One in four 17- and 18-year-old students have such an individual involved in their transition planning, compared with one in ten 14-year-olds. Similarly, the active participation of representatives from a variety of other outside organizations increases as early adulthood approaches, from one in ten 15-year-olds to one in five 17- and 18-year-old students, and a variety of services may be needed to ease the transition for some students.

Supports for transition. Instruction focused specifically on transition planning (e.g., a specialized curriculum designed to help students assess options and develop strategies for leaving secondary school and transitioning to adult life) is one way to help students reach their goals. However, only 64% of students have received such instruction. Older students are more likely than younger students to have had it. Of concern is that instruction regarding transition planning is not provided to all students, nor is it commonly provided when transition planning begins.

Generally, more post-high-school service needs are identified as part of transition planning as students approach the transition to adult service systems. Most notably, vocational training and employment service needs are more commonly identified for older students than for younger peers. Parents of older students are more likely to receive information from the schools about adult services, and school contacts with many kinds of outside organizations on behalf of students with disabilities intensify as school exit nears.

Transition Planning Reflects a Diversity of Needs and Abilities

Although the abilities and limitations of students who share a disability category are tremendously diverse, that category serves as a “shorthand” way of depicting key aspects of the disability-related challenges students face. Thus, the goals and needs specified in students' transition plans, the participants in the planning process, and many transition-related activities differ markedly across the categories.

Students' goals. Students with disabilities have multiple goals that reflect their future plans. That the various transition goals are shared by some students in all disability categories masks a large range across categories in the percentages of students who have each goal. For example, although about half of students with disabilities overall plan to go to college, that plan varies from 10% of students with mental retardation to more than 70% of students with visual impairments. Postsecondary vocational training is planned for about 40% of students with disabilities overall; however, almost 60% of students with other health impairments have this goal, compared with about 20% of students with visual impairments. Supported employment is the transition goal for fewer than 10% of students with disabilities overall, but it is the goal of almost 40% of students with autism.

Supports for transition. NLTS2 investigated a number of supports to assist students in making progress toward their transition goals: a course of study students should pursue to meet their transition goals, instruction focused on transition planning skills, and a list of postschool service needs consistent with their goals. The percentages of students for whom these supports are in place vary with students' disability category. Specification of the students' course of study in the IEP relative to transition goals varies from 65% of students with hearing impairments to 75% of students with learning disabilities. Instruction for transition planning designed to assist students in assessing their options and developing strategies for transition is received by 55% to 70% of students across categories. Students with autism or multiple disabilities are the most likely to receive this type of instruction; students with other health impairments are the least likely to do so.

Students' transition plans also identify a wide variety of service and program needs for the post-high-school period. The transition plans for students with learning disabilities or hearing, orthopedic, or other health impairments are the most likely to specify postsecondary education accommodations. The plans for students with autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness typically specify a constellation of postschool services, including vocational training, supported living arrangements, and behavioral interventions, as well as transportation, social work, mental health, and communication services. The plans for students with mental retardation often identify some, but not all, of these services, particularly vocational training, supported living arrangements, transportation assistance, and social work services. The plans for students with emotional disturbances are very likely to specify behavioral interventions and mental health services. For students with specific sensory or physical disabilities, the plans typically suggest other types of services, such as audiology, vision, and mobility services and occupational and physical therapy.

The types of organizations and agencies that schools contact regarding programs or employment for students when they leave high school reflect both the students' postschool goals and identified needs. Schools typically make more contacts for students in the disability categories that have more identified needs. Schools also are more likely to provide parents of students in the disability categories that have multiple identified service needs with information about appropriate services than they do for students in disability categories with fewer identified needs.

Perceptions of the transition planning process. Parents and school staff of students in each disability category hold a range of views regarding transition planning and the school programs designed to meet students' transition goals. For example, school staff report that more

than half of students with visual impairments have programs that are very well suited to help them achieve their transition goals. In contrast, only one-third of students with emotional disturbances have such highly rated school programs; they also are the most likely to have parents who report that transition planning is not very or not at all useful for their children. On the other hand, more than 4 in 10 students with mental retardation or visual impairments have parents who report that the transition planning process is very useful.

The Transition Planning Process Reflects Income and Racial/Ethnic Differences

The characteristics of the transition planning process that are associated with students' demographic characteristics are limited largely to some transition goals, parents' and youth's participation in the transition planning process, and parents' perceptions of that process.

Students' goals. Income is strongly associated with the likelihood of students' having a transition goal of attending a 2- or 4-year college. Consistent with this finding, students from upper-income households are more likely than those from lower-income households to plan on attending a college or university, have postsecondary education accommodations identified as part of transition planning, and have schools make contacts with colleges and universities on their behalf. Although no differences are associated with income or race/ethnicity in attending a vocational training program or employment as postschool transition goals, low-income and African-American students are more likely to have vocational training, placement, or support identified as postschool needs than are their upper-income and white peers. Schools also make more contacts with vocational schools for African-American students than for their white peers. In addition, racial/ethnic differences are associated with the likelihood of students' having independent living or enhancement of social/interpersonal relationships as transition goals. Larger proportions of African-American students than of their white peers have these goals.

Participants in transition planning. Household income and racial/ethnic differences are strongly associated with the participation of parents in the transition planning process. Parents of white students and those from upper-income households are much more likely to attend transition planning meetings than parents of culturally diverse students or those from low-income households. School staff report that the quality of student participation in transition planning varies by student characteristics, with more passive participation by African-American students, who also assume leadership roles less frequently than do their white or Hispanic peers.

It is encouraging to note that no differences exist between income or racial/ethnic groups regarding the participation of school staff in the transition planning process. However, participants in transition planning from outside organizations (other than VR) are more likely to be involved with planning for students in low-income households.

Perceptions of the transition planning process. An interesting relationship exists between parents' satisfaction with their level of involvement in the transition planning process and how useful they perceive that process to be. The parents of students from diverse backgrounds and from low-income households tend to be less satisfied with their level of involvement, but are more likely to perceive the transition planning process as useful, compared with parents of white students and those from more affluent families. Perhaps the lower level of involvement of these parents is not a reflection of the value they place on the process but more an indicator of their availability to participate, their comfort with school staff or procedures, or their cultural views of authority.

This national picture of the transition planning process is only the first step in the NLTS2 exploration of this aspect of students' secondary school experiences. Later NLTS2 reports will address the question of whether or not differences in students' transition planning relate to their achievements in postsecondary education, employment, and independence during early adulthood.