SPECTRUM SHEPHERD RESEARCH

Beyond the Transition Plan

What the evidence says about moving from compliant planning to coherent preparation for adult life

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A research synthesis on transition-plan quality, implementation capacity, functional readiness, and the systems that shape life after school.

Executive Summary & Key Findings

The United States spent the first era of modern special education policy establishing a basic right: students with disabilities could not simply be excluded from public education. Over time, federal policy asked a harder question. Access to school was necessary, but what would happen when school ended? Today, IDEA defines transition as a coordinated, results-oriented process intended to improve academic and functional achievement and prepare students for postsecondary education, employment, independent living, adult services, and community participation.

More than three decades later, transition planning itself is no longer unusual. Federal accountability requires states to monitor transition-age IEPs, and both nationally representative and autism-specific research show that planning is common. The more difficult question is whether those plans are coherent enough, and the surrounding systems capable enough, to translate goals on paper into meaningful preparation for adult life.

The more consequential question is therefore not simply whether a transition plan exists. It is whether the plan is sufficiently individualized, coherent, actionable, and connected to instruction, authentic practice, evidence of progress, and the adult systems that ultimately shape life after school.

Taken together, the evidence supports a more precise thesis than "schools are failing transition." Transition planning is broadly established. What remains uneven is the connective tissue: the link from assessment to goals, from goals to annual instruction, from instruction to repeated practice, from practice to evidence of progress, and from school-based preparation to the community and adult systems that shape post-school life.

The problem also cannot be assigned to schools alone. IDEA itself describes transition as a coordinated set of activities. Employment, transportation, housing, vocational rehabilitation, postsecondary education, adult disability services, families, employers, and community organizations all influence whether a plan can become a lived adult pathway.

Key Findings

1	**Transition planning is broadly established.** The next question is increasingly about the quality and execution of the plan, not simply whether a plan exists.
2	**Compliance is the floor, not the definition of quality.** Research and state guidance distinguish the presence of required elements from the coherence, ambition, and usability of the plan.
3	**Quality lives in the links.** Assessment, postsecondary goals, annual IEP goals, instruction, authentic practice, progress evidence, and cross-system handoff need to connect.
4	**The implementation gap appears after the plan is written.** Recent educator evidence shows that writing plans is far more common than delivering some employment, independent-living, community, and job-site experiences.
5	**Transition is a systems problem.** Schools are central, but adult agencies, employers, postsecondary institutions, transportation, families, and community infrastructure shape what can actually happen.

What this review does not show. The evidence does not justify saying that schools generally ignore transition, that most transition IEPs violate IDEA, or that poor adult outcomes can be attributed primarily to educators. The evidence points instead to variability in quality and delivery across a transition system that necessarily spans schools, families, adult agencies, employers, and communities.

1. From a right to attend school to a mandate to prepare for adult life

Modern special education law began with exclusion. The U.S. Department of Education notes that in 1970 public schools educated only about one in five children with disabilities, and many states still had laws that excluded certain children altogether. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 changed that foundation by establishing a federal entitlement to a free appropriate public education and the individualized planning structures that eventually became central to IDEA.[1]

But access created a second-order problem. A student could receive years of special education services and still reach the end of school without a clear route into employment, further education, independent living, adult services, or community life. Federal amendments in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly addressed this transition from school to adulthood. The 1990 reauthorization renamed the law IDEA, added autism as a disability category, and required an individual transition plan as part of the IEP framework. The 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations further emphasized results and the transition provisions that now center measurable postsecondary goals, age-appropriate transition assessment, and coordinated services.[2][3]

The current definition is unusually important because it shows how broad the federal ambition became. Under 34 C.F.R. §300.43, transition services are a "coordinated set of activities" within a "results-oriented process" focused on improving academic and functional achievement. The listed post-school destinations include postsecondary and vocational education, integrated employment, adult services, independent living, and community participation. The definition also includes instruction, related services, community experiences, employment and adult-living objectives, and, when appropriate, daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.[4]

That language matters. Transition was never conceived as a single meeting or form. It was conceived as a process intended to connect what happens in school to what a young person will need after school.

2. What IDEA requires - and what it does not

IDEA creates a federal floor, not a national transition curriculum. Beginning no later than the first IEP in effect when a student turns 16, or younger where state policy or the IEP team requires it, the IEP must include measurable postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessment and the transition services, including courses of study, needed to help the student reach those goals. States may impose earlier or additional requirements.[5]

IDEA establishes	IDEA does not prescribe
Individualized transition planning	One national transition curriculum
Age-appropriate transition assessment	A single required assessment instrument
Measurable postsecondary goals	Identical goals for students with similar diagnoses
Transition services tied to those goals	A fixed number of life-skills lessons or hours
Attention to academic and functional achievement	One universal definition of functional independence

1U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, "A History of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act." https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History

234 C.F.R. § 300.43, "Transition services"; 20 U.S.C. § 1401(34). https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.43

3Hughes, M. M., Kirby, A. V., Davis, J., et al. (2023). "Individualized Education Programs and Transition Planning for Adolescents With Autism." Pediatrics, 152(1), e2022060199. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2022-060199

4Trainor, A. A., Morningstar, M. E., & Murray, A. (2016). "Characteristics of Transition Planning and Services for Students With High-Incidence Disabilities." Learning Disability Quarterly, 39(2), 113-124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0731948715607348

5deFur, S. H. (2003). "IEP Transition Planning - From Compliance to Quality." Exceptionality, 11(2), 115-128. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327035EX1102_06. See also Morningstar & Clavenna-Deane (2018), Your Complete Guide to Transition Planning and Services.

IDEA establishes	IDEA does not prescribe
Community experiences and adult-living objectives	One delivery model for community-based instruction
Daily living skills when appropriate	Daily-living instruction for every student regardless of assessed need

This distinction is crucial to evaluating schools fairly. IDEA can require a planning process, measurable goals, assessment, and appropriate services. It does not provide a turnkey system for creating individualized functional-skills instruction, arranging work experiences, teaching community navigation, establishing adult-agency relationships, or measuring skill generalization across settings. Those tasks fall to state and local systems, IEP teams, families, agencies, and community partners operating with very different resources and local conditions.

Federal monitoring reflects this legal focus. IDEA Part B Indicator 13 asks states to report the percentage of transition-age IEPs that contain specified required components, including measurable postsecondary goals, transition assessments, transition services and courses of study, relevant annual goals, student invitation, and appropriate agency invitation. States must set their annual Indicator 13 target at 100 percent.[6]

Indicator 13 is important. But it answers a compliance question: are required elements present? It is not, by itself, a comprehensive measure of whether the plan is coherent, instructionally strong, sufficiently individualized, or successfully implemented over time.

3. The transition-plan paradox: presence is not quality

One of the easiest mistakes in discussing transition is to treat the absence of planning as the main problem. The evidence does not support such a simple picture.

A 2023 Pediatrics study used a population-based autism surveillance cohort covering three U.S. catchment areas. Of 322 autistic adolescents whose IEPs could be reviewed at ages 15 to 16, 297, or 92 percent, had an associated transition plan. Among students with a plan, 89 percent had postsecondary education goals and 93 percent had employment goals. Living-arrangement goals were much less common, at 41 percent, and documentation of conceptual, social, and practical adaptive-skill goals was less frequent still.[7]

The study should not be treated as a national census. It covered Arkansas, Georgia, and Utah, and it examined records for a specific surveillance cohort. But it demonstrates something important: the existence of a plan can be high while the content within plans still differs substantially by domain, disability profile, and location.

A nationally representative analysis of NLTS2 data reached a related conclusion for students with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and ADHD. Most students had transition plans and key stakeholders participated in planning meetings. The authors nevertheless called for closer examination of the disconnect between transition planning and post-school outcomes.[8]

The field has therefore spent years trying to move beyond a binary question - plan or no plan - toward a harder question about quality. Sharon deFur articulated the distinction in 2003. Morningstar and Clavenna-Deane later organized an entire chapter around the same problem. Tennessee guidance now states it with unusual clarity: "View legal compliance as only the baseline for evaluating the services and supports you deliver." Findley, Ruble, and McGrew make the same point even more directly: "a compliant IEP may not be high quality." A 2026 transition-planning article is explicitly titled "Beyond Compliance," underscoring how persistent the issue remains.

6Tennessee Department of Education (2018). Special Education Framework, transition component, p. 59. https://transitiontn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SPED_Framework_Updated_Aug_2018_FINAL.pdf

7Findley, J. A., Ruble, L. A., & McGrew, J. H. (2022). "Individualized Education Program Quality for Transition Age Students with Autism." Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 91, 101900. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2021.101900

8American Institutes for Research (2022). Fairfax County Public Schools Special Education Comprehensive Program Review: Year 2 Final Report, transition findings. https://fairfaxcountysepta.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/fcps-special-education-comprehensive-review_year-2-final-report-1.pdf

That is not a criticism of compliance. Compliance is essential. A plan that fails to meet IDEA requirements cannot reasonably be considered a strong plan. The point is that the reverse does not automatically follow: satisfying the required elements does not establish that a plan is instructionally coherent, appropriately ambitious, or fully implemented.

4. The Transition Execution Chain: from plan components to adult readiness

A useful way to think about a high-quality transition plan is therefore as a chain of evidence and action:

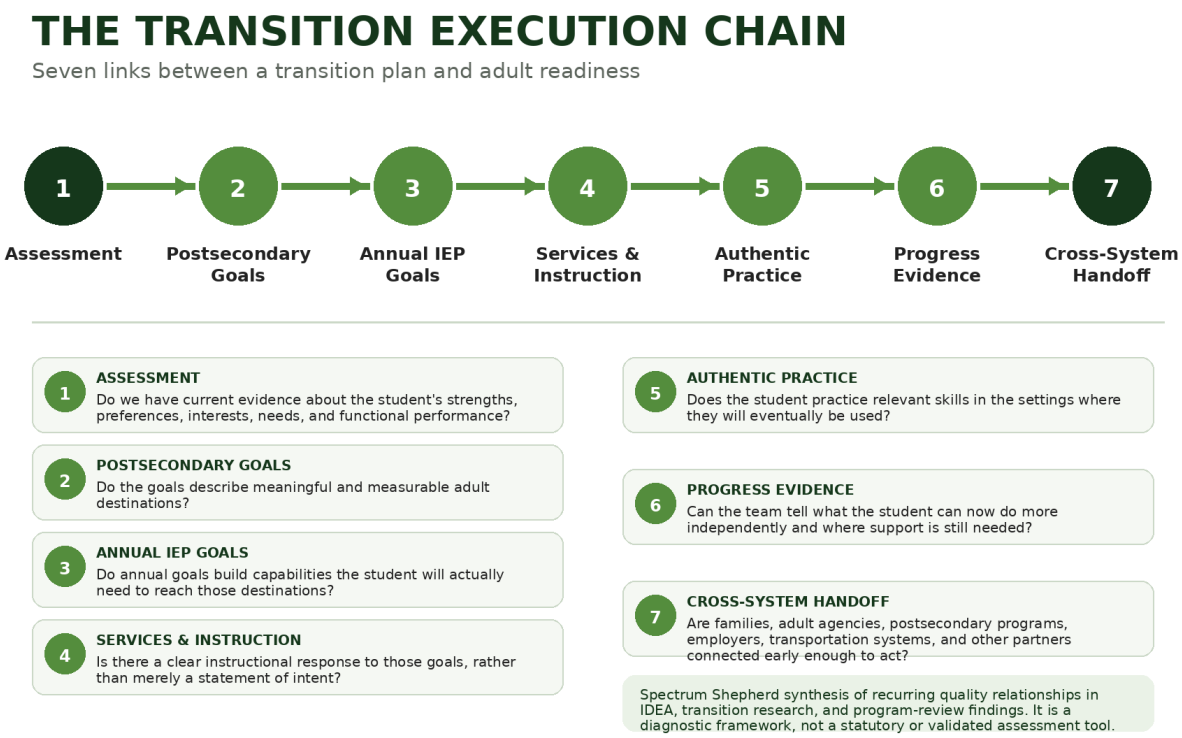


Figure 1. The Transition Execution Chain - a synthesis of recurring relationships in the transition-quality literature.

A transition plan can contain recognizable required components while one or more of these links remain weak. That is why plan quality is better understood as coherence and usability, not simply completeness.

The most compelling research on transition-plan quality does not show an empty form. It shows broken links.

Findley, Ruble, and McGrew examined final-year IEPs for 20 autistic students in two mid-southern states. The sample is small and should not be generalized as a national prevalence estimate. Its value is diagnostic: the researchers examined whether individual parts of the IEP connected to one another. They found three recurring weaknesses: failure to meet some federal quality standards, limited content in recommended instructional areas, and misalignment among present levels of performance, annual IEP goals, and postsecondary goals.[9]

That misalignment is the heart of the issue. More than two thirds of the IEPs documented a social-skill or behavior need in present levels, yet fewer than one quarter contained an annual goal addressing that need. The authors also found relatively few annual goals directly related to documented postsecondary goals. They cautioned that Indicator 13 was designed primarily for compliance, not for a complete assessment of quality.[10]

A newer study offers a complementary view. Krishnan and colleagues analyzed the IEPs of 48 autistic high-school students from 11 states who were pursuing traditional diplomas. Social-emotional, behavioral, and executive-function

9Travers, H. E., Cole, A. J., & Starkey, A. E. (2026). "Special Educators' Confidence and Training in Effective Transition Practices: A Statewide Assessment." Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals. https://doi.org/10.1177/21651434261416405

10U.S. Government Accountability Office (2012). Students with Disabilities: Better Federal Coordination Could Lessen Challenges in the Transition from High School, GAO-12-594. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-12-594

annual goals were common, but fewer than half of the IEPs included annual goals related to employment, postsecondary education, or independent living. Importantly, this finding concerns annual IEP goals, not the federally required measurable postsecondary goals, and it should not be misread as a finding of legal noncompliance.[11]

The same plan-versus-coherence pattern appears outside small research samples. In 2022, the American Institutes for Research completed an independent comprehensive special education review for Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia. The review concluded that the district met federal regulations requiring transition plans and met or exceeded IDEA indicators related to postsecondary outcomes. Yet AIR also found that transition goals and services could lack alignment: only 65 percent of sampled IEPs demonstrated alignment between all transition goals and selected transition services, with another 23 percent mostly aligned. Quality also varied by disability category.[12]

That Fairfax example is especially useful because it resists an easy blame narrative. This was not a finding that a district had simply ignored transition. The district had transition structures, resources, and high compliance. The independent review still found room between having the pieces and having the pieces fully connect.

65%	23%	FAIRFAX
full alignment between all transition goals and selected services	mostly aligned	met federal transition requirements and met or exceeded postsecondary outcome indicators

Source: American Institutes for Research (2022), Fairfax County Public Schools comprehensive special education review.

5. From planning to delivery: the implementation gap

If plan quality is the first issue, implementation capacity is the second. Writing an individualized plan and delivering the experiences implied by that plan are different kinds of work.

A particularly revealing 2026 study surveyed 185 special education teachers across 57 Tennessee districts, representing 38.3 percent of districts in the state. The sample was experienced, averaging roughly 15 years in special education. Nearly all respondents, 93 percent, reported writing IEPs and transition plans. The percentage reporting other transition activities dropped sharply: 66.7 percent delivered transition assessments, 34.9 percent provided employment instruction, 33.9 percent provided independent-living instruction, 28.5 percent provided community-involvement instruction, 23.7 percent planned work-based activities in school, and 12.9 percent planned work-based activities at job sites.[13]

93%	34.9%	12.9%
wrote IEPs / transition plans	**provided employment instruction**	**planned work-based activities at job sites**

One-state evidence, not a national prevalence estimate. Source: Travers, Cole, and Starkey (2026), n=185 Tennessee special educators.

The same study assessed confidence in 27 evidence- or research-based transition practices drawn from NTACT:C resources. Only one practice reached majority confidence among respondents. More than half of teachers reported receiving no training in 25 of the 27 practices. Confidence in connecting students to community supports and opportunities was similarly limited.[14]

11U.S. Government Accountability Office (2017). Youth with Autism: Federal Agencies Should Take Additional Action to Support Transition-Age Youth, GAO-17-352. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-352

12U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, "A History of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act." https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History

13U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, "A History of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act." https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History

1434 C.F.R. § 300.320(b), transition IEP requirements. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.320

The study is not a national census, and self-reported practice is not the same as direct observation. But the pattern is difficult to ignore: the most nearly universal activity in the survey was plan writing, while many of the activities that convert a plan into adult preparation were far less common.

This helps explain why calls for "better transition planning" can miss the practical problem. A stronger document alone is not enough. Teams need usable assessment, instructional content, evidence-based teaching strategies, age-respectful materials, time for individualization, mechanisms for progress monitoring, access to authentic environments, and relationships with people and organizations outside the school. Without that execution layer, improvement efforts can simply create better-written intentions.

6. What stronger transition preparation requires

The research base does not offer one universal program for every student. It does, however, identify recurring practices and experiences associated with stronger post-school outcomes and a growing set of evidence-based approaches for teaching transition-related skills.

An updated synthesis of secondary-transition predictors identified a range of in-school experiences associated with later employment, education, and independent-living outcomes, including paid employment and work experience, self-determination and self-advocacy, self-care and independent-living skills, social skills, inclusion in general education, career and technical education, community experiences, transition programming, family expectations, and other student and program characteristics. These predictor studies are often correlational, so they should guide practice without being treated as proof that any single ingredient causes an adult outcome.[15]

A separate systematic review focused on instruction in functional transition skills identified nine evidence-based practices and 22 research-based practices across more than 45 transition-related skills. The practices included structured approaches to teaching vocational, technology, self-determination, finance, community, and other functional skills. The important implication is not that every school should use the same package. It is that transition education is an instructional field with a research base, not merely a planning requirement.[16]

This distinction makes quality more concrete. A transition IEP should not be judged only by whether it names employment or independent living as a destination. A stronger question is whether the student is receiving instruction and experience that measurably builds the capabilities needed for that destination.

This is also why student participation matters. A student-centered process can still be largely adult-directed. Research has repeatedly linked self-determination and self-advocacy to better transition experiences and outcomes. The goal is not symbolic participation in an IEP meeting, but increasing the student's ability to understand choices, express preferences, set goals, solve problems, request support, and direct more of the planning that will eventually become his or her adult life.[17]

7. Transition extends beyond school

There is an inherent tension in transition policy: schools are held responsible for preparing students for environments that schools do not control.

A student may need competitive employment, public transportation, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, postsecondary disability services, Medicaid-funded supports, developmental-disability services, housing options, employer accommodations, family support, or community-based recreation. The quality of the school plan matters, but the adult pathway depends on whether those other systems exist, connect, and have capacity.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office has documented this cross-system problem for years. In 2012, GAO reported that students with disabilities and families face a complex patchwork of federal and state programs and that students may be inadequately prepared in part because of limited opportunities for vocational and life-skills training or

1534 C.F.R. § 300.43, "Transition services"; 20 U.S.C. § 1401(34). https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.43

1634 C.F.R. § 300.320(b), transition IEP requirements. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.320

17U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Part B SPP/APR Indicator 13. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/part-b-spp-apr-indicator-13/

work experience while in school. GAO also found limitations in coordination among the federal agencies involved in transition.[18]

In 2017, GAO conducted a nationally generalizable survey of 588 school districts about services for transition-age autistic students. About 85 percent of districts reported providing life, social, or behavioral-skills instruction. Employment supports were less universal: 69 percent reported work experiences and 63 percent job coaching. Transportation education or awareness was reported by about 53 percent of districts, and specialized housing education or planning by roughly 34 percent. GAO also found that services varied with district size and poverty level.[19]

Those findings are important for two reasons. First, they show that many schools are doing substantial transition work. Second, they show why a national conversation about "what schools provide" must acknowledge local capacity. A large district with transition specialists, transportation, employer partnerships, and nearby adult agencies is operating in a different environment from a small or high-poverty district with fewer staff, fewer employers, and limited transportation infrastructure.

For autistic students and many other learners, the setting of instruction can matter as much as the content. GAO stakeholders emphasized that some daily and community skills are best practiced in authentic environments. A student may be able to describe how to order food, use a bus, ask a supervisor for clarification, or make a purchase without yet being able to perform the skill independently in a busy restaurant, transit system, workplace, or store. Generalization is therefore not an extra feature of transition education. For many functional skills, it is part of the outcome itself.[20]

> ***The phrase "transition plan" can obscure this systems reality. What the student ultimately needs is not only a school document, but a coordinated pathway across settings and institutions.***

8. Outcomes matter, but the national evidence has limits

Post-school outcome data are often used to make the transition problem sound simple. Popular discussions of autism, in particular, frequently repeat a single unemployment percentage as though it described all autistic adults in the United States today. That approach is not defensible.

The best-known national longitudinal evidence for disability-specific post-school outcomes has historically come from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). Those data remain valuable, but the cohort left secondary school many years ago. The newer NLTS 2012 study was designed around a nationally representative sample of about 21,000 students; Phase I surveys were completed with approximately 12,000 youth and their parents. IES describes Phase II as an administrative-data follow-up through high school and beyond. Its current project page, for a study scheduled through September 2026, still lists the 2017-2018 Phase I reports as the published descriptive products. As of August 2026, a comprehensive successor set of nationally representative disability-specific post-school outcome reports has not been published.[21]

That creates a real evidence limitation. We know from federal and peer-reviewed work that students with IEPs, and some disability groups in particular, face persistent risks in employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation. But we should resist pretending the country has a single fresh statistic that captures the current national transition experience for every disability group.[22]

18Hughes, M. M., Kirby, A. V., Davis, J., et al. (2023). "Individualized Education Programs and Transition Planning for Adolescents With Autism." Pediatrics, 152(1), e2022060199. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2022-060199

19Trainor, A. A., Morningstar, M. E., & Murray, A. (2016). "Characteristics of Transition Planning and Services for Students With High-Incidence Disabilities." Learning Disability Quarterly, 39(2), 113-124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0731948715607348

20deFur, S. H. (2003). "IEP Transition Planning - From Compliance to Quality." Exceptionality, 11(2), 115-128. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327035EX1102_06. See also Morningstar & Clavenna-Deane (2018), Your Complete Guide to Transition Planning and Services.

21Tennessee Department of Education (2018). Special Education Framework, transition component, p. 59. https://transitiontn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SPED_Framework_Updated_Aug_2018_FINAL.pdf

This limitation strengthens, rather than weakens, the case for better transition measurement. Schools need evidence that is closer to the student than a national employment rate: whether a student can perform a skill, how much prompting is required, whether the skill transfers to a new environment, whether progress is sustained over time, and whether school-based goals are translating into actual adult opportunities.

9. What we can conclude - and what we cannot

The available evidence supports a strong conclusion, but not an accusatory one.

Evidence supports	Evidence does not support
Transition planning is broadly established; quality and coherence vary.	A claim that schools generally ignore transition.
Compliance is necessary, but presence of required elements is not a complete measure of plan quality.	A claim that most transition IEPs violate IDEA.
Stronger transition preparation includes instruction, authentic practice, self-determination, progress evidence, and system coordination.	A claim that IDEA requires one curriculum or delivery model.
Schools are central actors within a broader transition system that includes families, agencies, employers, postsecondary institutions, transportation, and communities.	A claim that poor adult outcomes can be attributed primarily to educators.

A more defensible conclusion is that the United States has built a relatively mature transition-planning requirement around a much less uniform transition-delivery environment. The plan is the organizing mechanism. The quality of what surrounds it varies.

10. Building capability around the plan

If the central problem were simply that transition plans were missing, the policy response would be straightforward: enforce plan completion. The evidence points to a more difficult next stage.

The next challenge is to make transition plans more useful as engines of instruction and coordination. That means strengthening the practical infrastructure around them:

- transition assessments that meaningfully identify strengths, preferences, interests, and functional needs;
- postsecondary goals that actually drive annual IEP goals and courses of study;
- age-appropriate, adaptable instructional resources that reduce the need for teachers to build every lesson from scratch;
- evidence-based and research-based methods for teaching functional, vocational, self-determination, social, and community skills;
- better visibility into where a student is progressing, where support is still required, and whether learning generalizes beyond a lesson;
- more authentic opportunities for work, community participation, daily living, and self-advocacy;
- professional learning and implementation support for educators responsible for transition; and
- stronger, earlier connections to vocational rehabilitation, postsecondary institutions, adult-service systems, employers, transportation, and community partners.

This is a different policy and practice agenda from simply "write better transition plans." It asks what teachers and systems need in order to strengthen every link between assessment and adult opportunity - and to make good plans executable without turning transition into still more paperwork.

The distinction may be the most useful way to understand the current moment in transition education. The first generation of disability law fought for access. Later reforms made adult outcomes an explicit objective. Today, the

22Baker, S., Yoho, L., & Hedin, L. (2026). "Beyond Compliance: A Data-Driven Cycle for High-Quality Transition Plans." Journal of Special Education Preparation. https://doi.org/10.33043/2gtaycq8bw7

remaining work is increasingly about execution: turning an individualized plan into repeated opportunities to learn, practice, demonstrate, and generalize the capabilities adult life demands.

A transition plan should be more than evidence that planning occurred. At its best, it should be the connective tissue between a student's present abilities and the adult life that student is working toward. The question for schools, states, policymakers, researchers, families, and solution providers is how to make that connection stronger, more individualized, and more practical without turning transition into still more paperwork.

Why Spectrum Shepherd is examining this issue

Spectrum Shepherd began asking these questions after a short implementation pilot with eight public and private schools serving roughly 50 transition-age learners across four states. Educators described difficulty finding age-appropriate life and functional-skills materials, reported piecing together resources, and asked for better ways to see and document where individual learners were progressing or struggling. Those observations framed the research questions in this paper.

Those observations are not presented as proof of a national problem. The pilot lasted approximately three to four weeks and was designed as an implementation and feedback exercise, not a controlled efficacy study. Spectrum Shepherd develops tools for transition-age learners and educators, so its commercial interest is relevant context; the conclusions in this review are intended to stand or fall on independent law, federal evidence, peer-reviewed research, and third-party program reviews.

About this review

This paper examines a persistent question in secondary special education: why can a transition plan be present, and even satisfy core procedural requirements, while the student still receives an uneven level of preparation for adult life? The focus is the distance between a legally required planning process and the broader instructional, experiential, measurement, and cross-system work that high-quality transition preparation appears to require.

The review distinguishes three kinds of claims: what federal law requires, what research identifies as stronger practice, and what schools and partner systems appear to have the capacity to deliver. Those categories should not be collapsed. "Students with disabilities" is used for IDEA and federal data; specific disability categories are named when the underlying research does so; "neurodivergent" is treated as a broader contemporary term, not a uniform IDEA or research category.

Research limitations and evidence gaps

This review is intentionally conservative where evidence is weaker. Several issues remain under-documented nationally, including state-by-state variation in transition quality measures; transition-educator caseload, time, and workload; transition-assessment quality and usage; progress monitoring for functional skills; and newer evidence on generalization across school, home, community, and workplace settings.

The evidence base is also uneven by disability category. Some studies are autism-specific; some focus on high-incidence disabilities; others include students with more significant support needs. Findings should not be casually generalized across populations, and descriptive IEP studies cannot establish that a particular plan feature caused a later adult outcome. Those limits do not erase the central finding: transition planning is routine enough that the next question is increasingly about the quality, coherence, and implementation capacity surrounding the plan.