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Avoid 3 common mistakes in postsecondary transition planning

Many school districts continue to struggle to provide adequate transition planning services for students with disabilities, a review of recent cases shows.

Indeed, there is an abundance of case law initiated by parents in which school-based transition planning efforts have been contested.

For example, in *Jefferson County Board of Education v. Lolita S.*, 113 LRP 39783 (N.D. Ala. 09/30/13), the judge found that "stock" goals for postsecondary transition services failed to meet the unique needs of a student with an SLD. In this case, the IEP did not contain individualized goals because age-appropriate transition assessments had not been conducted.

The failure to conduct transition assessments is one of several common transition planning mistakes that Arlyn Roffman addressed in a recent conference session, *Avoiding Litigation: Learning from Common Mistakes in Transition Planning.* The conference was sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children'sDivision on Career Development and Transition in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education.

"Transition planning is complex, but it can be done well," Roffman, a professor at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., told *Special Ed Connection®.* "Most mistakes are avoidable."

Consider sharing the following tips and resources to avoid three common -- and potentially costly -- transition planning mistakes:

Conduct age-appropriate transition assessments

Adopting generic transition goals for a student with disabilities can land your district in court.

Under 34 CFR 300.320 , districts must ensure that students' IEPs include "appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills."

Yet, too often, special needs students' transition goals are not individualized or based on assessments, Roffman said.

"Developing transition plans without the benefits of assessments ... now that's a really big bugaboo," she said. In her review of transition-related case law, Roffman said she discovered "a lot of holes in a lot of cases" because districts hadn't conducted assessments.

For information on conducting age-appropriate transition assessments, explore the following resources:

- Conduct age-appropriate transition assessments to ensure FAPE.

- Consider using this 6-question transition assessment.

- *Age Appropriate Transition Assessment Toolkit,* published by the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center.

- Transition Assessment and Goal Generator, an online transition assessment scheduled for release in March 2014 by the Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment at the University of Oklahoma. To be notified by email when the TAGG becomes available, click here.

Write adequate IEPs

Inadequate IEPs fail students and make districts vulnerable, Roffman said.

Sources have described inadequate IEPs as those which are incorrect or incomplete, or which are beautifully written "fluff pieces" intended to comply with the IDEA, but offer few services of value to transitioning students with disabilities.

One IEP section that often is filled out incorrectly is PLEP B, Roffman said. "PLEP B is where activities related to vocational training [such as travel or social skills training] belong and people don't necessarily know that," she said. "PLEP B is widely misunderstood."

"My advice to people is to learn the form," she said. "Know the form and which information belongs where."

To help IEP teams enhance their IEP writing skills, read:

- SmartStart: IEPs -- Contents.

- SmartStart: IEPs -- Transition Planning (Substantive Requirements).

- SmartStart: IEPs -- Statement of Present Levels of Educational Performance.

- *Avoiding Cookie Cutter IEPs: Develop Individualized, Clear IEPs ... Prevent Costly Errors, Confusion.*

- *Postsecondary Planning: Using indicator 13 to Develop Compliant, Results-Driven Transition Plans.*

Provide 'roadmap' to community living

Special needs students may require social skills and employment training to participate in their communities successfully, yet some districts fail to provide coordinated, progressive training that will help students generalize new skills to the real world, Roffman said.

Some districts conduct social skills and employment training by the seat of their pants, feeling they can make it up as they go along, she said. "This is nearly always ineffective."

"If we want students to learn social skills and actually *use* them in real-life settings, we need to use proven practices described in special education, psychology, and social work literature," Roffman said.

Roffman recommends you use solid models of social skills training that include:

- Explicit teaching about body language.

- Instruction on specific skills, such as how to refuse a request or ask for help at a store or bank.

- Exercises that incorporate role-play, feedback, and coaching.

- Homework that requires students to use new social skills in real-life settings.

Also, social skills training should promote generalization across time and context "to get [students with disabilities] to use the skills effectively today *and* next week, in school *and* the community," Roffman said.

Similarly, school-based employment training, by itself, rarely helps special needs students effectively participate in their community. While it's acceptable to provide school-based training as a first step, she said, "ultimately we're aiming for community-based work because there's a high correlation between [employment training] in the community and later success."

For strategies and tips you can use to prepare students for community living, see these *Special Ed Connection*® related stories:
- Ensure transition planning addresses community living needs
- Teach customized employment strategies to give students with disabilities an edge
- Use vocational ed to address skill 'intangibles' that help students retain jobs
- Promote self-determination to prepare students for independent living
- How to empower students with LD to self-advocate

For more stories and guidance on this topic, see the Postsecondary Transition Roundup.

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