

## Examining the Quality of Secondary Transition Plans Against Research-based Criteria in Preparing Students with Disabilities for Postsecondary Success

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As required by law a transition plan is supposed to be designed to clearly define a student's postsecondary goals by addressing the strengths, needs, and interests of the student in order to develop an appropriate curricular plan and community-based instruction necessary to meet the student's outlined postsecondary goals (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; IDEA, 2004). This study examined the secondary transition plans of students with disabilities, who graduated in 2011 from a small rural school district, for quality based on a set of research-based criteria in preparing the students' to meet their desired postsecondary goals. Although the majority of the transition plans were found to be inadequate in quality according to the set research-based criteria taken from a combination of sources including the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC, 2008) Indicator 13 checklist, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) regulations, and Johnson's (2003) *Parent and Family Guide to Transition Education and Planning*, implications for practice were discussed.

*Keywords:* outside agencies, postsecondary outcomes, secondary transition plans, special education, students with disabilities.

The transition planning process is supposed to be created based on students' needs, preferences, and interests along with collaboration from students, school staff, parents, and outside agency representatives (IDEA, 2004; Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Angell, Stoner, & Fulk, 2010). The IDEA (2004) requirement under Indicator 13 states that students 16 years old and above must have an active transition plan that includes appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that will reasonably enable the students to meet the

postsecondary goals; however, the quality of the secondary transition plans from a sample of graduates with disabilities' from the class of 2011 did not meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan.

Students with disabilities often face challenges such as lagging behind their nondisabled peers in employment and educational opportunities (Clark & Unruh, 2010; Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Lane, Carter, & Sisco, 2012). Of the students with disabilities who ultimately graduate from college, it often takes them double the time

to complete their degrees in comparison to their nondisabled peers (Barber, 2012; Clark & Unruh, 2010; National Council on Disability, 2011). Students with disabilities are less likely to obtain employment, education, or income on the same level as their nondisabled counterparts (Clark & Unruh, 2010; Lane, Carter, & Sisco, 2012). Although some research reveals that more students with disabilities have more access to services that help with securing postsecondary education and employment placement, many students are not aware of the services or properly prepared to access the services (Lane, Carter, & Sisco, 2012). Many of the postsecondary challenges that students with disabilities face are linked to poor preparation for postsecondary success as a result of poor secondary transition planning (Angell et al., 2010; Barber, 2012; Herbert, Lorenz, & Trusty, 2010).

According to federal law, transition services must be provided to high school students with disabilities to help them achieve postsecondary outcomes in academia or employment (IDEA, 2004). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition services should be results-oriented and focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of students with disabilities to facilitate their movement from secondary activities to postsecondary activities (IDEA, 2004). Research by Herbert et al. (2010) showed that successful transition planning must involve the students, their families, and an effective transition team in order to achieve long-term ongoing success for students with disabilities. Many transition plans written at the secondary level are merely pro forma and are written more for compliance rather than intention. According to Collet-Klingenberg and Kolb (2011), just writing down transition goals does not mean that actual implementation of the goals will

take place. Under the IDEA (2004), transition plans should build upon a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs in order to maximize postsecondary success.

A transition plan should specify student goals for successful transition from secondary to postsecondary life. Unfortunately, sometimes it is just a document that leads to outcomes that students could have achieved without a written plan. A plan alone does not prepare students for the postsecondary challenges that they may face, such as few employment and educational opportunities and low self-determination (Morgan & Openshaw, 2011). However, one's contribution to society is often examined by his or her ability to obtain employment and/or obtain a postsecondary education, but this is often a challenge for students with disabilities (Clark & Unruh, 2010). With more and more students being diagnosed with disabilities, successful postsecondary transition planning is a priority and more data is needed on how well secondary educators prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary challenges so that they can lead more meaningful lives (Angell et al., 2010; Herbert et al., 2010; Morgan & Openshaw (2011).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 revealed that students with disabilities are less likely to have checking accounts, credit cards, and long-term employment, and are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education programs after high school (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). The results of this study highlight the need for the implementation of more effective transition plans (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Transition planning is important in allowing students with disabilities and their families to prepare for life after high school (Mazzotti et al., 2009). "The primary purpose of transition planning is to clearly define the student's

postsecondary goals by addressing and defining student strengths, needs, and desires in order to develop an appropriate curricular plan, including academic and functional coursework and community-based instruction necessary to meet postsecondary goals" (Mazzotti et al., 2009, p. 45).

According to Dragoo (2006), the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) indicated that transition is a change from adolescence to adulthood that requires the areas of postsecondary education, vocational training, employment, independent living, and community participation to be considered in planning for students' transitions from high school to adulthood under the IDEA (2004). Federal laws for students with disabilities such as IDEA (2004) have been revised many times since the original passage of the Education of All Children Handicapped Act in 1975, but the most significant revision in regards to the transition process occurred in 1990 with the new provisions to provide students with disabilities with transition services such as assessments, parent participation, and student participation (Barber, 2012; Herbert et al., 2010). Under federal law, transition services include the following: coordinating activities for students with disabilities to promote movement from secondary education to postsecondary education, assessing the needs of students with disabilities and providing services to address those needs, curriculum and instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, and adult living (IDEA, 2004; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Lane et al., 2012).

Research reveals that although transition goals are written down, the actual implementation of the goals rarely take place (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011).

Price, Gerber, and Mulligan (2003) summed it up best with the question, "Do school-age transition programs... have a legitimate curriculum, or are they delivering instruction based on professional hunches rather than the realities of the workplace" (p. 357). Gaps in the literature still exist in determining the impact that students' secondary transition plans have on postsecondary outcomes when properly executed.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the quality of secondary transition plans in preparing students receiving special education to successfully meet their postsecondary goals. The quality of the transition plans were assessed according to a set of previously listed external best practices criteria taken from a combination of the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC, 2008) Indicator 13 checklist, the IDEA (2004) regulations, and Johnson's (2003) *Parent and Family Guide to Transition Education and Planning*.

Federal and state laws require that students with disabilities leave high school prepared for competitive employment, higher education, and independent living; however, many students with disabilities are underserved from a legal and moral perspective in that they are not always as well prepared for postsecondary life as their nondisabled peers (IDEA, 2004; Leandro v. State, 1997). Many transition plans only serve as written documents to comply with the laws and are not serving their intended purpose of leveling the playing field for students with disabilities so that they can access the same postsecondary successes as their nondisabled peers. Until transition planning is approached in a more competent and helpful manner students with disabilities will continue to be placed at a disadvantage after completing high school.

This mixed-methods study examined the impact of the quality of individual education program (IEP) secondary transition plans on the postsecondary outcomes of graduates with disabilities. Little research exists in comparing the implementation of secondary transition plans to the postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities regarding how the quality and effectiveness of secondary transition plans influence the postsecondary success of students. The rationale for conducting this study was to increase understanding of the connection between secondary transition plans and postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities. This mixed-methods study sought to answer the following research question through utilizing qualitative and quantitative data in assessing the secondary transition plans of students with disabilities.

How does the quality of the secondary transition plans of students who graduated from a special education program in 2011 meet the research-based proposed criteria of a sound transition plan in preparing the students for postsecondary success?

### **Participants**

Participants were chosen from a purposeful sample of students from the graduating class of 2011 who had IEP secondary transition plans in place at the time of graduation. The participants consisted of 39 students with disabilities from a small rural high school in a southern state including Caucasian males ranging from ages 18 to 20 (n=20), Caucasian females ages 18 to 19 (n=8), African American males ages 19 and 21 (n=2), African American females from ages 18 to 19 (n=5), Hispanic males ages 19 to 21 (n=3), and a Hispanic female age 22 (n=1). The students came from various socioeconomic

backgrounds ranging from lower working class to upper middle class families.

### **Procedure**

Thirty-nine secondary transition plans of students who graduated in 2011 with an IEP in place at the time of graduation were evaluated through the use of content analysis using an external set of criteria that establish the makings of a sound transition plan. Criteria from external sources of best practices to assess the quality of the transition plans by using keywords and phrases that describe what a solid transition plan should look like were used to conduct the study. Keywords and phrases were derived from research-based characteristics of quality plans such as age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals; curriculum and instruction services that prepare students to achieve postsecondary goals; student participation; consideration of students' strengths, needs, interests, and preferences; outside agency and parent input along with collaboration; and identification of needed services by the students in achieving their postsecondary goals (Clark & Unruh, 2010; IDEA, 2004; Johnson, 2003; NSTTAC, 2008). The keywords and phrases were then used to rate the quality of the secondary transition plans.

**Instrumentation.** The rating scale utilized to assess the quality of the transition plans was based on construct validity derived from the literature and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) Indicator 13 checklist (IDEA, 2004; Johnson, 2003; NSTTAC, 2008). The Indicator 13 checklist is used nationwide by several school districts and it was designed to check if IEPs meet the requirements of Indicator 13 which mandates that students 16 years old and above have an active transition plan that includes appropriate measurable

postsecondary goals based upon the students' transition service needs, age appropriate transition assessments, transition services, and curriculum and instruction that will enable the students to meet postsecondary goals (Alverson et al., 2011; IDEA, 2004; NSTTAC, 2008). The NSTTAC established a set of criteria that details the components of Indicator 13 into a checklist and the same criteria taken from NSTTAC along with other criteria taken from the literature was used to assess the quality of the transition plans in this study (Alverson et al., 2011; IDEA, 2004; Johnson, 2003; NSTTAC, 2008). Based on the Indicator 13 checklist and construct validity derived from the literature regarding the legal requirements of the IDEA, a rating scale ranging from 5-25 was developed to assess the transition plans based on the amount of keywords and phrases found in the plan that best fit within each of the following five external criteria of a quality transition plan for the purpose of this study (Alverson et al., 2011; IDEA, 2004; Johnson, 2003; NSTTAC, 2008):

1. The plan included age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals.
2. The plan included curriculum and instruction services that prepared the student to achieve their postsecondary goals such as higher education, independent living, competitive employment, self-determination, and community experiences.

3. The plan included student participation and addressed the strengths, needs, interests, and preferences of the students.
4. The plan included outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies, mental health agencies, and other servicing agencies along with teacher and parent input and collaboration.
5. The plan identified services that the student needed from outside agencies to achieve their postsecondary goals.

The rating scale was broken down by assigning 1 point for two or fewer keywords and phrases, 2 points for three to five, 3 points for six to eight, 4 points for nine to eleven, and 5 points for twelve or more keywords and phrases. Once all of the keywords and phrases were tallied, the total rating for each plan consisted of 5-9 as poor, 10-14 as moderate, 15-19 as adequate, 20-24 as good, and the top score of 25 as exemplary. The established ratings were used to determine the quality of the transition plans and to answer the research question regarding the quality, effectiveness, and alignment of the plans with the secondary curriculum in successfully meeting the postsecondary goals of the students.

Table 1  
Keywords and Phrases Found in Transition Plans

Criteria	Keywords/Phrases
1. age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals	employment, education, and training, independent living, technical college, higher education, college, university, community college, competitive employment, military, apprenticeship budget, financial management , after high school he/she will
2. curriculum and instruction services that prepared the student to achieve their postsecondary goals such as higher education, independent living, competitive employment	school staff, administrator, teacher input, self-determination, self-advocacy, curriculum of study, career and technical
3. self-determination, and community experiences	courses ,community experience, training, transition activities, postsecondary services, technical college, higher education, college, university, community college, competitive employment, military, apprenticeship, student will pursue goal of
4. outside agency involvement, parent and teacher input and collaboration	vocational rehabilitation, mental health agencies, disability services parent, teacher/staff, guardian, family input, parent, guardian, or family members stated
5. identifiable services needed by the student from outside agencies to achieve his or her postsecondary goals	student, parent, teacher/staff input, agency representative input, vocational rehabilitation, mental health agencies, disability services, postsecondary services, postsecondary mentors, student support

Once all of the keywords and phrases were tallied, the total rating for each plan

was assigned the established rating of poor, moderate, adequate, good, or exemplary.

The ratings were then used to determine the quality of the transition plans in meeting the postsecondary goals of the students.

### Results

The purpose of the research question was to utilize research-based criteria to assess the quality of the secondary transition plans in preparing students with disabilities for postsecondary success. The results of this study revealed that the transition plans failed in helping to prepare the students for postsecondary success. Laws such as the IDEA (2004), the Perkins Act (2006), and the *Leandro v. State* (1997) ruling mandate that students receive secondary instruction that enables them to successfully engage in postsecondary education and employment. However, the majority of the students were

not properly armed with a secondary transition plan aimed at helping them to meet postsecondary challenges and their intended postsecondary goals. The following table reflects the results of the quality of the secondary transition plans based on the established rating scale of poor, moderate, adequate, good, and exemplary.

Table 2  
Transition Plans Ratings

Plan	Criterion 1 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 2 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 3 keywords/p hrases	Criterion 4 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 5 keywords/ phrases	Total Rating
1	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
2	1	3	1	1	1	7=Poor
3	1	1	1	1	2	6=Poor
4	1	2	1	1	2	7=Poor
5	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
6	2	1	1	1	1	6=Poor
7	2	2	2	2	2	10=Moderate
8	2	2	2	1	2	9=Poor
9	2	2	2	1	2	9=Poor
10	3	2	1	1	2	9=Poor
11	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
12	1	2	1	1	2	7=Poor
13	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
14	2	2	3	1	2	10=Moderate
15	1	3	2	1	2	9=Poor
16	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
17	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
18	2	3	2	1	3	11=Moderate
19	2	3	2	2	3	12=Moderate
20	2	1	3	1	1	8=Poor
21	2	2	2	1	2	9=Poor

22	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
23	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
24	1	2	1	2	2	8=Poor
25	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
26	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
27	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
28	2	4	2	1	2	11=Moderate
29	2	3	2	2	2	11=Moderate
30	2	2	1	1	1	7=Poor
31	1	2	2	1	1	7=Poor
32	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
33	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
34	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
35	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
36	2	3	2	2	2	11=Moderate
37	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
38	2	2	2	2	2	10=Moderate
39	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
Mean	1.85	2.46	1.85	1.15	1.59	8.89

The range of scores for the quality of the plans was 7-12 and none of the secondary transition plans met the criteria under the adequate, good, or exemplary range. Twelve out of 39 of the secondary transition plans were found to be moderate meaning that the rating fell between 10-14 based on the established rating scale used to rate the plans. The remaining 27 plans were found to be poor falling between the ratings of 5-9 based on the established rating scale. The average quality score of the plans was 8.89 and none of them rose above the upper level of poor which was 9. Even in eliminating the outlier scores (7 and 12), the transition plans still yielded an average quality score of 8.86, indicating that on average the quality of the 39 transition plans failed to meet even the lowest standard of being considered moderately successful. The mean of each criterion fell below the three

point rating meaning that none of the secondary transition plans contained more than five keywords or phrases recommended by the literature to form a sound plan.

Many of the plans consisted of filling in the blanks on the prescribed secondary transition plan template with many of the blanks left unfilled. The template included blank sections for the student's needs, strengths, preferences, and interests' information, transition assessments, course of study, education, employment, and independent living postsecondary goals, along with transition services such as instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, adult living skills, daily living skills, and functional vocational evaluations. Table 3 below demonstrates the information provided on transition plan templates.



Table 3  
Transition Plan Template

IDEA transition plan template required information	Percentage of plans that provided this information	Percentage of plans that failed to include this information	Percentage of plans that provided clear and original assessments of the information
Students' needs, strengths, preferences, and interests	100%	0%	46.2%
Transition assessments	84.6%	15.4%	51.3%
Course of study	84.6%	15.4%	43.6%
Education postsecondary goals	92.3%	7.7%	25.6%
Employment postsecondary goals	89.7%	10.3%	71.8%
Independent living postsecondary goals	69.2%	30.8%	51.2%
Instructional transition services	100%	0%	30.8%
Related services	94.9%	5.1%	28.2%
Community experiences transition services	94.9%	5.1%	48.7%
Employment transition services	100%	0%	58.8%
Adult living transition services	82.1%	17.9%	61.5%
Daily living transition services	89.7%	10.3%	10.3%
Functional vocational evaluation transition services	92.3%	7.7%	7.7%

Although 100% of the transition plans contained the required information regarding the needs, strengths, preferences, and interests of the students, less than half (46.2%) of the plans provided clear assessments of the information in regards to the particular students. Eighty-four point six percent of the plans included transition assessments and 15.4% did not. Of the 84.6% of the plans that contained a course of study for the students, less than half of them (43.6%) provided clear and original assessments of the information. The majority of the plans (92.3%) contained postsecondary goals in which 25.6% of them were not derived from clear and original assessments. Many of the plans (89.7%) included postsecondary goals that provided clear and original assessments at a rate of 71.8%. However, only 69.2% of the transition plans included independent living goals with 51.2% providing clear assessments, but 30.8% of the plans did not include any independent living goals at all which defies the mandate of Indicator 13 in helping students prepare for postsecondary success.

All of the transition plans (100%) included instructional transition services; however, only 30.8% of them provided clear and original assessments of this information. Most of the plans contained transition services of related services and community experiences at a rate of 94.9% for both of the transition services, and 28.2% of the plans provided clear assessments of the related services while 48.7% of the plans provided clear assessments of the students' community experiences. All of the plans (100%) included employment transition services and over half of them (58.8%) provided clear and original assessments of this information. Eighty-two point one percent of the plans contained some form of adult living transition services and 17.9% did

not. Although many of the plans (89.7%) included daily living transition services, only 10.3% of the plans provided clear assessments of this information for the particular students. Also, a large amount of the plans (92.3%) contained functional evaluation information in the blank, but only 7.7% of the information provided clear and original assessments of the information. Approximately, 25% of the transition plans were incomplete with one or more sections left blank. Although many of the plans provided some form of information in the required blanks, a lot of the information provided was basically for pro forma purposes and did not pertain to the intended outcomes of the students. All 39 of the plans contained the words "not applicable" in at least one or more blanks, which is unacceptable because all of the information requested on the transition plan template is applicable as required under the IDEA (2004).

According to Herbert et al.(2010), the postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities will be limited if teachers do not view the transition planning process as more than just words on paper utilized to meet the requirements of the law. The evidences in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that the transition planning of the class of 2011 graduates with disabilities failed to meet even the most basic legal requirements, not to mention the failure to meet the particular and specialized needs of the students. Therefore, the answer to the question is that the secondary transition plans were poor in meeting the quality of the proposed criteria for a sound plan and in preparing the students for postsecondary success. The results indicated that many transition plans were identical and typically completed to provide documentation to fulfill federal and state requirements with little follow-up and feedback to inform improvement.

## Discussions

The transition process from high school to adulthood is challenging enough for most graduates but students with disabilities face even more challenges with the transition process (Robick, 2010). Many students with disabilities face discrimination due to their disabilities when looking for jobs and the current state of the economy does not ease matters for them. Although secondary transition plans are designed to support and prepare students for postsecondary challenges, few deliver the actual transition services such as curriculum and instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, and adult living to address students' needs (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Collet-Klingenberg and Kolb (2011) indicated that merely writing a transition plan is not enough and that actual implementation such as exposing students to real-life experiences and delivering adequate curriculum and instruction is the best way to prepare students for successful postsecondary outcomes.

The assessment of the transition plans indicated that the plans were not well written and the total mean rating of the plans was an 8.89 of a possible 25 and the total mean of the criteria was 1.78 of a possible 5. All of the transition plans fell within the scoring range of 7-12 which made them poor or moderate based on the transition assessment scale used for the study, meaning that they were not sound plans based on the literary criteria and that systematic assessments of the quality of the plans did not occur at the secondary level. Even if the lowest score and highest score were taken out of the total mean rating, the mean score for the transition plans would be 8.86, which still equates to a rating of poor on the transition rating scale. This is very unnerving because federal and state mandates require that students with

disabilities engage in secondary transition planning activities that facilitate their movement into postsecondary success and all students are entitled to sufficient skills to successfully engage in postsecondary education and employment (IDEA, 2004; *Leandro v. State*, 1997; Perkins Act, 2006). Therefore, most of the secondary transition plans proved to be merely written as pro forma and were not properly designed to meet the needs of the students in preparing them for postsecondary success.

## Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, the implications for practice consist of the need to improve and possibly overhaul the secondary transition planning process through the establishment of a system for monitoring and accountability of the regulations of federal guidelines regarding transition plans by the administrators of the teachers in charge of developing and implementing the plans. High school teachers need to establish a systematic assessment of transition plans for quality in preparing students for postsecondary success. The results of the question surrounding the quality of the secondary transition plans support the need for improving the secondary transition planning process for students with disabilities. Federal laws such as the IDEA (2004), the Education of All Children Handicapped Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act were all aimed at providing people with disabilities with equal opportunities to education and employment (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Despite such laws, graduates with disabilities continue to face significant challenges when it comes to postsecondary success in the areas of employment, education, and independent living (Barber, 2012). Unfortunately, it seems that no serious attention was taken

by the high school staff in developing the secondary transition plans to ensure the possible success of the school's most vulnerable citizens.

### Limitations

This study was confined to a small rural school district in the south and cannot be generalized to other school districts. Also, several of the teachers in the study who wrote the transition plans were responsible for writing more than one of the secondary transition plans which led to many students having identical transition plans. All of the transition plans were written using a required computer program format that was used by the school district, in which the teachers had to fill in the required blanks. However, the format included all of the federal requirements under the IDEA (2004) of what a secondary transition plan should consist of to guide the teachers in writing the transition plans. Also, some of the secondary transition plans were incomplete, leaving out the intended postsecondary goals of the students and the curriculum alignment which may have contributed to the lack of the graduates' postsecondary success. In order for secondary transition planning to fulfill its intended purpose and work the way that the laws intended, teachers will need to stop viewing the transition planning process as limited and unnecessary and adhere more to federal regulations so that more graduates will find postsecondary success within the reasonable intended outcomes of their transition plans.

### Conclusion

According to the IDEA (2004), schools must include successful individual transition plans in students' IEPs that are monitored by

state and local school districts while students are in high school and after graduation. However, the results of this study indicated that the majority of the graduates' transition plans were "cookie cutter" plans often written by the same few teachers with very little individuality for the diverse needs of the students. Unlike their regular education peers, students with disabilities are limited in their postsecondary options and writing their future off as just a compliance requirement with little effort and passion is an outrage. Until transition plans and the entire transition process are approached in a more competent and helpful manner by teachers, parents, students, administrators, and outside agency representatives, students with disabilities will continue to be placed at a disadvantage after graduation.

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