

Intentional teaching and planning  
for California's diverse learners  
to allow each child  
an opportunity  
to achieve

THE

# EDGE

newsletter

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## Transition to Adult Life



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*This issue of The EDge examines the direction of secondary transition services for students with disabilities as they move from the world of K–12 education into adult life. Some stories explore the importance of self-advocacy, high expectations, and repeated opportunities to explore dreams and real-world possibilities. Others consider how increased collaboration is creating a more seamless set of services for students and a more coordinated and manageable experience for their families. In general, this issue envisions ways to improve the purpose of public education: to enable each child to develop all of his or her own potential.*

## Moving On

The transition from adolescence into adulthood is often exciting—and nearly always challenging. This change can be even more challenging if you have a disability. The California Department of Education is using the latest research and best practices to lessen the challenge and to ensure a successful transition for every student in the state.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the law that guides special education services, requires transition plans to be in place when a student turns 16. Many schools and local education agencies (LEAs) begin well before that time; and many parents, early childhood educators, and teachers know the importance of “mapping to employment” from birth. They know that the earlier students receive the education, services, and supports that prepare them for the full range of adult experiences, the greater each student’s chance of success.

Many schools and LEAs are also actively engaging students in important decisions about their futures. By learning from the students themselves about their dreams, preferences, strengths, and fears, transition teams are shaping the kinds of plans that students are most likely to understand, invest in, and successfully complete (pages 10, 15).

Increasingly, parents and teachers in the state are holding high expectations for all students—and those students are growing to believe in themselves and their abilities (pages 5, 9).

And schools are doing more than teaching the technical skills that students need to get a job after high school. Students are learning those skills that everyone needs in order to keep a job: the capacity to work through challenges, to work well with others, to work creatively—in general, to bring to work the entire toolkit of “soft skills” that industry has identified as essential to employment success and longevity (page 12).

California has a history of creating coordinated, family-focused services for children with disabilities. Early Start, which began in 1986, is only one example. The state again has made history with its recent interagency agreements to improve transition services at local, regional, and state levels. Because of these agreements, the goal of developing one individualized plan for each student with a disability and shaping that plan to set each student on a trajectory toward success (page 3) is becoming reality.

To improve and strengthen every aspect of the transition process, the state works with many treasured allies, among them, the California Transition Alliance. This statewide community of practice is committed to sharing the most effective transition strategies with all relevant agencies, supporting the state in ensuring that every student with a disability is given every chance to succeed, in school and beyond. ◀



## Letter from the State Director



To prepare our young citizens for college and career and, ultimately, jobs that earn a family-sustaining income is what our education system is tasked with, regardless of a person's disability, race, ethnicity, family or living situation, or socio-economic status.

Leaving high school and the K–12 system can be a challenging time and complicated transition for any student and his or her family. The answer to the question of what happens next doesn't always come easily. That's why, in an effort to prompt early, deliberate planning for the transition to adult life, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act has distinct requirements around secondary transition. Yet, despite these requirements, sometimes there are systemic barriers that persist, and students and their families may not plan soon enough or know all of the options and supports available, which may include college, supported employment, or other person-driven goals.

We can always do better. In California, the employment rate for people with disabilities is far below the employment rate for people without disabilities. The employment rate for people with developmental disabilities is even lower. This confirms the need to address the barriers that prevent students from developing in school the skills that can translate to employment. For many students with disabilities, these barriers include a high school diploma. Currently, 20 percent fewer students with disabilities receive a high school diploma in four years than students without disabilities (California State Council on Developmental Disability, 2019, California employment rates. Retrieved from [https://scdd.ca.gov/ca\\_empl\\_rate/#.XNMTHFgzXD4](https://scdd.ca.gov/ca_empl_rate/#.XNMTHFgzXD4)).

In California there are nearly 800,000 students with disabilities between birth and age 22. That's a lot of potential future workers and contributors to our communities. Our students all have the potential to become productive, tax-paying citizens, who are fully engaged in family and community life. How can we ensure this future? We start by being true to our code: "Each child is a unique person, with unique needs, and the purpose of the education system of this state is to enable each child to develop all of his or her own potential" (California Education Code, Section 33080). We do it by starting early, by mapping to employment from birth, and by looking for ways to develop the potential and interests of every child.

Research shows us that when educators are intentional about inclusion, and when they plan for students with the full range of learning variability, even students without disabilities benefit. A presumption of competence, a commitment to the importance of fully realizing each student's potential, an expectation that everyone can learn and will contribute to the larger society—all of these things help to ensure that no one is left behind or left out.

This issue of *The EDge* explores what the endgame of K–12 schooling can be when, in all plans and initiatives, we ensure that students with disabilities are part of the equation; what happens when students with disabilities are included in the decision-making processes that affect their own lives, and when they find their own voice and advocate for themselves. The issue also explores how families and teachers can help to improve educational outcomes when the same high expectations are held for all children. The newsletter's four-page insert encapsulates the transition process and offers a practical, at-a-glance map of many of the supports, opportunities, and considerations that can contribute to a successful transition from school to adult life.

Our state is massive in size and population, our system of education is complicated, and many children come to school with a variety of learning styles, preferences, and needs. I hope this issue of *The EDge* serves as a meaningful tool and resource for students, families, and educators. Beyond that, I hope it inspires critical thought and necessary dialogue around adequately preparing and supporting our students with disabilities to find fulfillment and success after school. — *Kristin Wright*

## Changing Systems, Improving Services

*“In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions.”*

— Margaret Wheatley, organizational behavior specialist

California has for decades modeled a national standard for interagency collaboration to improve services for families and children with disabilities. (Since 1986, when Early Start services were added through the reauthorized IDEA, the state has served as a national model for interagency collaboration.) This pattern continues. Recent major legislation and policies, along with committed state leaders and advocates, are increasing the levels of coordination among agencies and services that prepare students with disabilities to enter adult life—and to find and keep gainful employment.

The stakes are high. In 2017, the employment rate for individuals with disabilities in the United States was 19.1 percent, while “the employment-populations ratio for those without a disability was 65.9 percent” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019, Economics news release. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>) Not surprisingly, individuals with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty as those without. These numbers have remained intractable across the decades, despite the passage of such landmark legislation as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The kinds of transition services that will improve these numbers are coordinated, targeted, and easy to navigate.

California is getting there—through the relationships that key stakeholders are developing at every level.

### Clarifying

When students with disabilities graduate from high school with a regular high school diploma, or when they turn 22, they are no longer eligible for special education services under IDEA. Any special supports or services they need because of their disability must then be provided by agencies that serve adults. The law requires schools to develop with each student a plan for this transition and transfer of services, one that includes the interagency responsibilities and linkages that are and will be involved. But it gets complicated.

Liz Zastrow, program specialist at Lodi USD, talks about these complications. “Each agency has its own plan,” she says. It’s possible for students to have their Individualized Education Program (IEP) plan with the school, their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) with the Department of Rehabilitation, and their Individualized Program Plan (IPP) with their Regional Centers through the Department of Developmental Services. These plans are often duplicative and difficult to keep track of. “Some things just get lost,” says Zastrow, and other things don’t get done because families become overwhelmed. Adding to the complication, services often aren’t coordinated, eligibility requirements differ from one agency to the next, the language used is often highly technical or opaque, and it’s hard to find a place to get a straight answer.

These complications appear to be easing.

“One student, one family, one plan is the goal,” says Zastrow. “We got inspiration from the collaborative efforts between the California Department of Education and the Department of Rehabilitation. Kristin Wright and Joe Xavier [respective directors] knew California would never get anything to work for all kids without collaboration and breaking down silos.” Zastrow believes that the new state-level initiatives and the local partnership agreements are creating a healthier climate for effective transition services and making “silo-busting” possible. “If we truly want to change outcomes,” she says, “we do it together.”

“Changing the district’s focus to ‘one student, one plan’ has changed our program miraculously. We still have the minutia of regulations, but as those are worked out, I say to my team, ‘Let’s step back and, with a student-family focus, look at how we can do this.’”

## Collaborating

Zastrow advises transition programs to make “connections with agencies and organizations that could matter. Then invite them to meetings. We’ve had many meetings on how to blend services, but we have no meetings without our agency partners. We’re not doing this in isolation. You also have to bring your administrators along, and your fiscal people. They need to understand what you’re doing.”

The good news, according to Zastrow, is that “bringing agencies together makes it easier to figure out how” to blend transition services for students. “Then it’s about how you collaborate with local partners and blend goals.”

She is candid about the complications. “We’re still working on turf wars. And we have to teach people how to collaborate. But I see this as customer service. We are serving students and our community. Successful employment has to be the expectation. When you think about it, it’s common sense. And this [level of collaboration] allows you to deal with students and families as if it’s one program. It’s exciting for us.

“Our next focus is to develop one plan for every student.”

## Braiding Programs and Funds

The federally funded California PROMISE (CaPROMISE) program has helped Lodi improve its transition protocols and raise the postsecondary expectations for students. The district was one of 19 in the state chosen to receive CaPROMISE money to pilot new collaborative approaches to providing transition services. With a focus on students who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the project selected LEAs with high populations of youth in poverty. As a result, its findings may not fully reflect the transition experiences and needs of all youth. What may prove broadly applicable, however, is what the program shows about the value of braiding funds and services—for such ongoing contracts as WorkAbility, the Transition Partnership Program, paid internships, and California Career Innovation, all of which are designed to help students with disabilities prepare for the world of work.

CaPROMISE is also showing the value of serving the family. “If we expect students with disabilities to become productive citizens and reduce their reliance on Social Security benefits, we must also address the needs of the families,” says Dr. Mari Guillermo from the Interwork Institute at San Diego State University, which administers CaPROMISE.

“There is no question that blending programs and dollars is complicated for the system and for administrators,” says Guillermo. “But it shouldn’t be complicated for students and their families. They need to be focused on their dreams.”

Zastrow uses the metaphor of a curtain when talking about what schools and agencies can do to make that focus possible. “In front of the curtain,” she says, “we talk with students, families, and communities. We’re Lodi Career Connections. We’re one program with one thing in mind: what the student needs. Behind the curtain, our staff have different funding streams.” How those funding streams are being coordinated is still being worked out, “but our parents and students don’t need to know any of that. They need to know that their child is going to be OK.”

Maripat Nevins coordinates transition services for Grossmont USD and agrees that the increased collaboration among state-level agencies is changing things “tremendously for the best.” The newest and most exciting aspect for her “came on the heels of the DOR contracts changing” in a way that allows her to serve more students. Nevins is referring to how the DOR has made its vocational rehabilitation (VR) services more flexible so that many more students with mild to moderate disabilities can receive services while they are still in school. “These are students who do not need the intense services of students who are typically served by DDS,” students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The newly eligible students “still become DOR clients and have access to job coaches, development coaches, and Workability. We’re leveraging contracts and grants to make this happen.

“Collaboration is a lot of work with no increase in budget. So I tell our teachers that we’re planting the seeds and tilling the soil. The blooms may not happen until later, but we still need to plant those seeds for the students. And students with mild to moderate disabilities need as much help as we can give them.”

The new policies are making more of that help possible. The vocational rehabilitation contract options in particular are giving Nevins and her team more ways to help their students learn the skills they need to enter adult life, to provide for them a clear roadmap, and to secure for them a job.

This year her program has seen “46 successful closures”—students with jobs that “they’re happy with” and the skill to move on to new jobs. She is hopeful that the next improvement in state policy will involve securing “year-out services,” with a person or agency helping students navigate the maze of that first year after IDEA services end. “That is where you see the real strength of a program. But we’re building the plane while we’re flying it.”

## **Sustaining Efforts**

In the meantime, Nevins is grooming others to sustain and grow the transition services programs. “A program can’t continue to develop and produce on one person’s efforts. We at GUHSD Special Education Career Connection are working closely with teachers, parents, support staff, administrators, outside agencies, and community businesses to continue to build strong connections to provide the best possible supports and outcomes for students. Our staff understands the program—the budgets and the intricacies. We have no secrets.

“New leaders are emerging as momentum is developing. I work with people who see the value in the services we provide and what the students needs. But the success of the program will be in the quality of the collaboration”—and of the relationships. ◀



## Policy and Legislation to Strengthen Partnerships

The following legal and policy changes are contributing to improved transition services for students with disabilities and their families.

### **California's Employment First Policy (2013)**

California's Employment First Policy established "that opportunities for integrated, competitive employment shall be given the highest priority for working-age individuals with developmental disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disabilities" [Welfare and Institutions Code Section 4869(a)(1)]. The policy "makes services and supports available to enable persons with developmental disabilities to approximate the pattern of everyday living available to people without disabilities of the same age, to support the integration of persons with developmental disabilities into the mainstream life of the community, and to bring about more independent, productive, and normal lives" [Section 4869(a)(1)].

### **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act 2014**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act supports initiatives that provide the training and services that individuals with disabilities need to find and keep a job by coordinating federal programs that provide training, education, and vocational rehabilitation. The act also requires states to design their workforce development programs to teach the skills and offer the credentials that employers actually need. The act fosters collaboration at regional levels by supporting the alignment of "workforce development programs with regional economic development strategies to meet the needs of local and regional employers."

### **Competitive Integrated Employment Blueprint: Real Work for Real Pay in the Real World**

The *Competitive Integrated Employment Blueprint* is an interagency agreement developed by the California Departments of Education, Rehabilitation, and Developmental Services, in collaboration with Disability Rights California and the California Department of Health and Human Services. In support of the state's Employment First policy, these agencies formally agreed to work together to make their highest priority the employment in an integrated setting, at a competitive wage (competitive, integrated employment: CIE), for individuals with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities. To learn more, go to <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/cie/>

### **Local Partnership Agreements**

Local Partnership Agreements formalize the ways that schools and their local Department of Rehabilitation and Regional Center "will work together to streamline service delivery, engage their communities, and increase competitive, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with ID/DD." For more information and sample agreement templates, go to <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/cie/>



## Self-Advocacy: What It Looks Like

“See it, be it, bring it to others”

That’s the path Chris Coulston and Kevin Fortunato are encouraging other students with disabilities to follow. The “it” is self-advocacy, creating your own vision of the life you want to lead, focusing on your strengths and abilities, not your deficits or diagnosis or label.

With their mothers and co-presenters, Ellen Coulston and Cheryl Fortunato, Chris and Kevin brought the gospel of self-advocacy to the recent Bridge to the Future transition conference in Anaheim. Thirty California students with disabilities heard how these two young men have not been defined by their own disabilities. The students learned how to find support from adult allies, how best to contribute to IEP meetings, and, especially, how to be active participants in their own futures.

The young men’s styles complement each other. Kevin, 21, is the more voluble. In conversation, words pour out of him as he says, “Self-determination is not giving up when there are obstacles” or “Transition is about the life you want to lead.” Chris, 22, is quieter, more deliberative, but no less passionate about asserting himself: “When someone says you can’t do something, I learn it on my own.”

Both saw self-advocacy in action, became self-advocates, and are bringing the message to others at conferences and in classrooms across the country. Today they have the jobs they have always wanted: Chris in health care, Kevin in early childhood education. But their paths to self-determination followed very different trajectories.

The story starts in preschool. Their mothers met when Kevin, who is on the autism spectrum and has a mild learning disability, and Chris, who had a language disorder and some early behavior issues, attended the same preschool.

Ellen and Cheryl shared information about schools and programs and kept in touch over the years. But their sons would not meet again for nearly 15 years.

### Chris’s Story

Once diagnosed, Chris began what would be nine years of speech therapy. “At an age when a child should have 1,000 words, he had 50,” says Ellen. Although he started school in a special education class, by third grade he was in general education. When he was 12, Ellen took him to his first transition conference. “I saw five ninth graders” who were making presentations, he recalls. “They knew their strengths and goals and what supports they needed to be successful. No one was talking like that in my school, either student or teacher. They looked confident to me, and I wanted to be that way, so I started taking steps to do what they did.”

Those steps included participating in a self-determination program called Kids Inspiring Kids, sponsored by the Parent Information Center of Delaware, where the Coulstons live. “We learned how to present in our IEP meeting. We learned how to start speaking up.” Soon he was asked to introduce the keynote speaker at a state transition conference. “It was the first time I spoke at a microphone in front of 500 people. It felt awesome! I knew I could do it again.”

He was a self-advocate at school, too. “I’m a visual learner, so I presented a power point of my IEP in seventh grade. By eleventh grade I was leading my IEP.” Going into the meeting, he said, “it’s important to know your strengths and if you need accommodations. But it’s not about what teachers want for me; it’s about what I want for myself.”

Chris accompanied Ellen to parent-teacher meetings. “At first they just talked to my mom. But she looked to me, and eventually they talked to me.” And when he was a junior in high school, “the principal gave me the opportunity to present at a faculty meeting.”

“He felt proud,” Ellen says. “He was becoming a person of agency.”

And he was finding allies. “My disability is when others think I can’t learn,” he says. One thing he wanted to learn was Spanish. “A kid with a language disability and nine years of speech therapy is going to take Spanish? The teacher believed in me; she believed everyone could learn.” And he did. He even took a second year of Spanish. A chemistry teacher was another ally. “She broke down the lessons, was patient, and her door was always open for help.”

Chris was simultaneously learning valuable nonacademic skills. An elderly relative was in a nursing home, “and we visited her every week,” he says. “After she died, my mom thought it was a good place for me to volunteer because I knew everyone. I loved volunteering there because I thought I would help them, but instead all the residents helped me. They helped me be a good listener; they helped me when they said, ‘I need you, Chris,’ or when they told me I was a good friend.”

There were other lessons, too. “I had to be on time. I learned to work as a team. These are all skills that I use at my job at the hospital. I have been practicing these skills since I was 14. I could have been even better if I started earlier.”

For the past three years, post high school, Chris has been donning scrubs and working as a patient escort at Christiana Care Health Systems. That is, when he isn’t traveling to conferences, telling his story, and bringing the message of self-determination to other students with disabilities.

### **Kevin’s Story**

Kevin left his home school at the end of fourth grade. “I was alone and no one played with me,” he says. He transferred to a state school for children with learning disabilities. But he was not happy there, either. “The teachers decided everything,” he remembers. “They didn’t care to hear what the students wanted. For a long time I wanted to be a preschool teacher. I love working with kids.” But no one at the school supported that kind of role for Kevin. The jobs he was assigned had nothing to do with his interests: standing in a line and placing an orange in a paper bag, one orange after another.

“From preschool on,” Cheryl says, “no one ever said ‘let’s start looking at what he can do well.’ They were just moving him through the system.”

Fast forward to 2015. Kevin is 18, in the first year of a transition program, and seeing himself only through his deficits. Ellen Coulston is a graduate student at George Washington University’s Graduate Transition certificate program. The course requires her to interview a student with disabilities, “to get into the kid’s world,” conduct a vocational assessment, and design a transition plan. She remembers the Fortunatos and asks if Kevin can be that student. And she decides to bring Chris to the interview at the Fortunato home in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

That’s when Kevin’s world began to change. “I said everything that was bothering me at school. I had to get it out on the table,” he recalls. And when Ellen administered a series of assessments, asking Kevin what his dreams were and what he wanted to do, the results were not surprising: his desire to work with young children matched the strengths demonstrated in the assessments.

But it was in Chris that Kevin was able to “see” self-advocacy—just as Chris had seen it in the students at his first transition conference.

Arriving for the first interview, Ellen realized that she had left her computer at home and asked Chris to drive back to get it. “You have a disability and you’re driving?” Kevin asked incredulously. That was the start of a conversation about what Chris had accomplished as a self-advocate—and how it was possible to realize your dreams.

“Chris taught me that you structure your own dreams, that you are so much more than your disability. Chris taught me that you need to be living the life you want to live,” Kevin says. “I needed to hear it from someone with the same struggles.” With a new sense of self and self-worth, he transferred to a technical high school to study early childhood education. “It wasn’t perfect at the beginning,” Cheryl remembers. “We had to

practice how Kevin should go in and advocate for himself. Over time {the teachers} started to see a change. They said, 'Let's ask Kevin what he's thinking.' They were allowing him to have power."

After graduation, Kevin applied for a position at a preschool. "For the in-person interview I said, 'By the way, I have a disability. Is it okay if I bring a job coach?' I wanted them to know that a disability isn't going to make me any less good at this job." He now works part time at the school, doing what he's always wanted to do. "Mostly I play with the kids and assist the teachers. I'm a floater. I go where they need me."

Thinking back on the day when Ellen and Chris Coulston came to his house, Kevin says, "It was a life-changing moment. I truly cannot imagine where I'd be today without Chris."

And like Chris, he is bringing the message of self-advocacy to others, speaking at conferences and in classrooms. He's even gone back to his old elementary school where he addressed fourth-grade students. "Autism doesn't define me," he told them.

## Team Empowerment

Chris, Kevin, Ellen, and Cheryl have formed Team Empowerment to help other students become self-advocates.

At conferences like the one in Anaheim, they ask the attendees to write their strengths, interests, job preferences, and needs on a single sheet of paper. And then they ask for volunteers to read the lists. For many students it's the first time they have expressed these thoughts and desires. "How does it feel to talk about your own strengths and interests?" the students are asked. In Anaheim, there were nods, smiles, a quiet "good."

They had seen self-advocacy in Chris and Kevin. They were learning to "Be it." ◀

## Resources

- ▶ *Busting Myths*, a video with Joey Travolta and California students with disabilities, is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmbH-CIBKB4&t=11s>
- ▶ *I Want to Work! I Know I Can!* from the California Transition Alliance, is at [http://www.catransitionalliance.org/docs/49-IWantToWorkIKnowICan10232016\(1\)\\_212201851804.pdf](http://www.catransitionalliance.org/docs/49-IWantToWorkIKnowICan10232016(1)_212201851804.pdf)
- ▶ Resources for self-advocacy and self-determination from Project 10 are at <http://project10.info>



*Kevin Fortunato and Chris Coulston*

## Turning Dreams Into Reality

Martha and Francisco are in their early 20s. They both have a disability, and before last November had never talked with anyone about their dreams for adulthood. Then their job coach, Christi Freels, took them to a conference in Anaheim. Since then, things have changed.

The California Transition Alliance sponsored this conference, *Bridge to the Future: Destination Employment*, which included an extensive Youth Strand designed to help students with disabilities model, learn, and share leadership and self-advocacy skills. “See it, be it, bring it to others,” was the motto, and it’s something that Martha and Francisco took to heart.

Freels saw “the institute open up new possibilities” for her students. At the event, Martha and Francisco met other young people with disabilities who had businesses, who were public speakers and successful actors, and who wanted to “spread the word” about the importance of self-advocacy and belief in possibilities, “not just stopping at the fear and expectations of others,” says Freels. At the conference her students “saw that there is so much more to life than they thought possible for them, that you don’t have to just work two hours a day at a local store and live at home. They saw opportunities and found a vision for their futures that went beyond the standard expectations. And not just for work, but for leisure opportunities—to do things that you just enjoy.” It turns out that Martha wants to be a photographer. Francisco wants to take up sculpting.

These two students left the conference feeling not just capable of more, but entitled to more. Martha is now taking drumming classes, and they are both enrolled in community college classes—“something really out of their comfort zones,” says Christi. And they both will “leave us for jobs next year.”

Both Martha and Francisco had been “sheltered but bright and high functioning,” says Freels, “although they struggled academically” in school. The conference was not a comfortable venue for them at first. “They declined over and over the chance to participate” in the personal interview process of the Youth Strand. “But the warmth and interest” of the interviewers “made the kids feel like they were part of the conversation, not on the outside.” Their dreams and ideas for the future came out of these conversations.

Freels has worked with students with disabilities in the Los Angeles Unified School District since 1985. And she’s not tired yet. “It’s so gratifying when you watch them grow and push through that fear.”

### Parents

Through her work, Freels has learned that “we have to start with parents. It’s important for me to respect all that they’ve done to get their kids here. And it’s my job to include them, to give them information, to help them see what’s possible for their children, and to help them believe that their kids can do more. We all can get stuck in protection and fear. It comes out of love, but parents must buy into a bright future for their kids.” She believes that students with disabilities need to be allowed to take risks for that to happen—by experiencing typical milestones, like learning to drive a car, for example, or getting an apartment.

### Self-Awareness

“I’m always amazed at the number of kids who can’t even talk about their disability” because no one has spoken directly to them about it, and they have not had opportunities to practice talking about it or explain how it affects their lives. “At the conference, the young people spoke proudly of their disabilities. They aren’t trying to fit into a typical world or typical culture or a typical conversation. They’re proud to be who they are. As a result, they can grow.”

## Real World Skills

Freels is a champion of getting individuals with disabilities “into the community so everyone is more comfortable with diversity.” In her work she helps students develop beginning employment skills and then finds a job for them. “We help them learn how to use the transportation system”—eventually on their own—“and we go along with them and coach them on the job. But we also have to train employers. Many of them give our kids performance reports that are too high. Nobody gets all fives and learns. They need to learn what they need to get better at. And by getting better, they build their confidence.

“Right now I’m trying to get our students connected to YO! Disabled and Proud” (Youth Organized! Disabled and Proud is at <http://yodisabledproud.org>). This organization connects, organizes, and educates youth with disabilities—doing essentially what the Youth Strand at the Anaheim conference did. “I want our kids to pass it on.” ◀



## What Can Adults Do? Be an Ally!

To be an “adult ally” of students with disabilities means to help students discover who they are and who they want to be—and helping them understand how their disability uniquely shapes their identity. It also means helping them plan for their own vision of the future.

In general, an ally will promote the child’s self-advocacy at an early age, be a good listener, have high expectations, and provide opportunities to develop and practice skills.

The most influential allies may change at different stages of a child’s life. Parents are often a child’s first allies, then an educator, possibly another student, maybe an employer—an ally can be any caring person who is willing to provide encouragement and guidance.

### Starting Early

“Infancy and early childhood set the foundation for transition planning,” says Sue Sawyer, president of the California Transition Alliance. Parents, she says, can encourage their children to develop pre-academic social skills, such as teamwork, by engaging in simple chores at home. “We want them to develop curiosity, to see themselves as having talents and abilities.

“And we want them to have choices” in their futures. Even before a child starts school, Sawyer says, parents can talk about the jobs in the stories they read or point out jobs in the community.

### Promoting Self-Advocacy

Encouraging self-advocacy at an early age may require allowing the child to take risks. “The child,” Sawyer says, “thinks, ‘What is that adult voice telling me? Is it saying you can’t do this, or is it saying maybe there’s a way you can do this; maybe we can try.’ It can be scary for parents, but they should ask themselves, ‘What do I want—an independent or dependent child?’”

Milt Wright agrees. A promoter of self-advocacy for students in transition, Wright says, “The challenge parents face is overcoming the fear that because of a disability their child needs to be protected, overprotected. They have to allow the child to fail just like any other child.”

“As a parent, don’t get stuck in what your child can’t do,” says Cheryl Fortunato, who facilitates self-advocacy workshops. “As parents and as teachers, ask what are the interests and talents of this person. It is our job to peel away the layers, pull out those talents, and cultivate opportunities. And to be there to help when there are failures.”

Other students can be allies, as well. “We don’t look at kids as teachers,” says Ellen Coulston, who also facilitates self-advocacy workshops. “But it’s a powerful motivator when young people see a fellow student with a disability who advocates for himself and has created the life he wants.”

### Listening

An essential attribute of an ally or mentor is to have “quality listening skills,” says Derek Shields, director of the National Disability Mentoring Coalition. Ask questions and really listen to the answers: What are the student’s interests, goals, preferences, needs? What are their dreams?

### Opening Up the World

Shields agrees that parents are a child’s first mentor. “They may be just trying to get through the day, but it is important to think about the longer-term objectives for the student,” he says. “It’s important to put the student in places where they would have access to professionals, see careers. That could be job shadowing opportunities, workplace visits, seeing people with disabilities in work situations.”

Adults, whether teachers or parents, “have to intentionally create situations where the student with

disabilities can lead meetings and conversations about their lives,” Shields says.

The IEP meeting is an obvious place for students to develop self-advocacy skills—and for adults to encourage that development. From kindergarten through high school, the student can progress from attending, to participating in, to leading IEP meetings (see page 10).

### **Creating High Expectations**

Effective allies know that there is a significant correlation between high expectations and student success (see page 5). “Parents and teachers need to believe that the students can succeed,” says Wright. “All students, no matter what their disability, have strengths,” he says. It’s the job of parents and teachers to recognize those strengths and help students develop them.

At school, educators can listen to what the students want for their future and provide the right opportunities, services, and supports. They can promote self-awareness by encouraging students to learn about and talk about their disability; they can introduce them to others with the same disability. And they can talk about what’s difficult and help find strategies to creatively manage limitations.

### **Working**

The most obvious activity for building student confidence—and practical skills—is work-based learning while still in high school. Teachers, job coaches, counselors, and other school personnel serve as allies when they help to place students in not just any job, but work or volunteer situations that match their interests, play to their strengths, and allow them to practice their skills and establish relationships with professional adults.

### **Handing Over Control**

Whatever roles they may play in a student’s life, allies can encourage students to take control of their own future to the greatest extent possible. But to be a truly successful ally, Sue Sawyer says, “You have to be authentic. You have to know yourself and help the student to know himself.” To parents, Milt Wright adds, “Yes, be an advocate for your child. But teach the child how to be an advocate for himself, to ask for what he needs to succeed.” ◀



# Involving Students in Their Own IEPs

Most young adults don't wake up one morning knowing how to advocate for themselves. Or how to share information confidently with others, describe their dreams, and articulate their strengths and challenges—or how those challenges affect their daily lives. These skills take most people—with and without disabilities—years to develop, but they are critical to success in adult life. All students can gain some mastery of these skills if they are given opportunities to learn and if they are supported in the learning process. For students with disabilities, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting represents one ideal place for all of this to begin.

## Basics

The law requires the IEP team to consider each student's individual strengths, weaknesses, needs, and interests in the creation, implementation, and evolution of the IEP. The law also requires the team to invite students to their own IEP meetings when transition plans are being developed. These plans, part of the IEP itself, map out how each student will move from the more protected and supported world of public education into adult life: what specifically a student will need to know and be able to do in order to live independently, continue learning, participate in the community, and gain employment. These meetings are about the students and their future. It makes sense for them to be there.

Best practice, however, goes well beyond the invitation, or even the student's actual presence. Research makes a strong case for students being as actively involved as possible in all of their IEP meetings, not just in transition-planning meetings.

## Benefits

"Nothing about me without me" is considered best practice for a reason. A high level of student involvement in the IEP increases a student's engagement in school and improves academic achievement, communication and self-advocacy skills, self-awareness and self-confidence, and motivation overall (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, & Stillerman, 2002). Not surprisingly, students with these skills are more likely to be enrolled in higher education and get better jobs after high school (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Students and teachers alike report that students who are directly involved in their IEPs know more about their disabilities, legal rights, and appropriate accommodations than students with disabilities who are not involved. The process teaches "students to take ownership for their own education" (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004). Research even suggests a correlation between IEP involvement and higher graduation rates and fewer inappropriate behaviors (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

There's more. When actively involved in their own IEPs, students learn the purpose of this legal planning and services document, their parents develop a clearer understanding of how they can support the child at home, and teachers create more effective plans. The process also is shown to increase parents' participation in the meetings, improve their communications with school staff, and generally contribute to better relationships between school and home.

Student-involved IEPs are appropriate for every student at any time, as long as their involvement is individualized based on the student's age, strengths, and needs. Adults can set the stage for student involvement by making the student and his success the focus of the meeting. With this clear and primary intention, team members can be confident that they are moving in the right direction.

## Student-Led IEPs

The "gold standard" of student involvement is the student-led (or student-directed) plan.

Embracing the goal of seeing the student actually lead and direct a part or all of the meeting requires careful thought and patient planning and begins by including students—and their parents—as equal partners



in the IEP team from the earliest appropriate age.

When considering this level of involvement, it's important to remember that there is no one "right" way. Students, teachers, and parents can be creative in finding how to support engagement and involvement to the greatest extent possible. The best IEPs "provide ways for students to have a voice in creating their goals and planning how to achieve them" (Anderson, n.d.).

With this vision in place, the student-involved/directed IEP can then provide a safe and supportive place for students not only to determine their goals and figure out how to reach them, but to learn about themselves while practicing such important skills as communication, planning, problem-solving, and self-advocacy.

## Preparations

To initiate student-involved and led IEPs, you'll first want to share with your school administrators and IEP team members (especially parents) the research about the benefits. You'll also want to introduce the idea to the student. By explaining the purpose and offering strategies for supporting the student to take gradual ownership of the meeting, you'll be setting him up for success.

Then start small.

No one could reasonably expect a child to lead—or even enthusiastically participate in—her very first IEP meeting. One way to start working toward greater participation is by:

- Explaining the purpose of the IEP in general.
- Explaining the specific goals of the next meeting.
- Discussing with the student and/or parent the level and type of participation that would be most appropriate for the child—and what larger participation goals might be.

You could then ask the student (well in advance of the meeting) to prepare to describe during the next meeting what she knows her strengths to be and how she uses them in school. For the second meeting, you might ask her to share her challenges in school, and the ideas she has for how to work with, around, or through them. At the third meeting, you could ask her to reflect on her dreams and goals for the immediate and distant future—while revisiting the topics of strengths and challenges.

As the student gradually increases his participation, he could be encouraged to take responsibility for one part of the meeting and then, as he gains experience, take control of most if not all of it. The process may be uncomfortable for the student at first, but research shows that real and lasting learning and growth involves being uncomfortable (Brown, B., 2016). It's the responsibility of educators and parents to provide an equal balance of support and opportunity for the child to grow and learn—and to be uncomfortable. And as with every other skill, practice is essential.

Careful scaffolding can ensure success for the student—and contribute tremendously to the desired outcomes: confidence, problem-solving and communication skills, self-awareness, and self-advocacy.

## Continuing

Parents and special educators will want to create many and ongoing opportunities outside of IEP meetings for the child to think about his future. They'll want to support the child to establish immediate and long-term goals and to reflect on what can help him reach those goals. They'll want to provide opportunities for many conversations and experiences that help him discover what his strengths and preferences are and what kind of work he would like to do when he's an adult.

Few children readily know the answer to questions about what their lives might be like after they finish school. But with the support of caring and interested adults, all children can grow into a greater understanding—and ability to articulate—their own answers. And with the help of caring adults they can have the freedom to change their minds often and continue dreaming about what the future holds. IEP meetings are a great place for this to happen. ◀

## Resources

- ▶ Read about the self-directed IEP as a research proven approach at <https://ou.edu/content/dam/Education/zarrow/ChoiceMaker%20materials/info.Self-Directed%20IEP-rev.pdf>
- ▶ Find a student script for leading an IEP at <http://www.smcoe.org/assets/files/learning-and-leadership/selpa/forms/iep-meeting-outline-agenda.pdf>
- ▶ Learn How to Run a Self-Directed IEP is at <http://iepmeetings.weebly.com/how-to-run-a-self-directed-iep.html>
- ▶ 10 Ways to Involve Young Adults in Their IEP Meetings is at <https://www.thepathway2success.com/10-ways-to-involve-young-adults-in-their-iep-meetings/>
- ▶ How to Run a Self-Directed IEP is at <http://iepmeetings.weebly.com/how-to-run-a-self-directed-iep.html>
- ▶ Student-Led IEP Meetings: Planning and Implementation Strategies, by Becky Hawbaker in Teaching Exceptional Children Plus, is at <http://faculty.virginia.edu/PullenLab/EDIS5141OnlineModules/Mod10/StudentLedIEPs-Hawbaker.pdf>

## Note

The expression “Nothing about me without me”—originally “Nothing about us without us”—emerged from the disability advocacy movement in South Africa in the early 1990s. See James Charlton’s *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, 1989, Berkeley: University of California Press)

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## Transition Plans and the IEP

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires a transition plan for every student with a disability. The plan must be written as part of a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), and IEP goals must reflect and support the postsecondary goals in the transition plan.

### For More Information

- ▶ The Wrightslaw article “Writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) For Success” explains how to incorporate transition plans into the IEP. Find the article at <https://www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/iep.success.bateman.htm>
- ▶ For information about how transition plans fit into the IEP, see “Transition Planning,” from the Center for Parent Information and Resources, at <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-transition/>

## Soft Skills: What They Are and Why They Are Important

Soft skills are fundamental to getting and keeping a job (Hes, 2017). More than simply “people skills,” soft skills include knowing how to do such things as manage time, take initiative, communicate effectively, deal with conflict, advocate for what you need, solve problems independently, stay on task, make and keep friends, and more.

While sometimes thought of as part of a person’s innate character, soft skills are those dispositions, attitudes, and abilities that students can learn about and get better at over time—with the right kinds of experiences and reinforcements from parents and teachers (Attia, 2017). And it’s essential that they do. “We often lose workers because of their challenges with soft skills,” says Susan Mazrui.

Mazrui is in a position to know. She works on disability-related public policy issues at AT&T, serves as co-chair of the Federal Communications Disability Advisory Committee, and sits on the board of the U.S. International Council on Disability and the Disability Equality Index advisory committee. She is also visually impaired—and convinced of the importance of soft skills for individuals with disabilities to get and keep good jobs.

“The work world can be rough,” says Mazrui. And whether or not a person has a disability, “we expect that if you apply for a job, you already have the skills you need to perform the essential functions of the job. As much as we’d like it to be, it’s not a level playing field. There are many misperceptions about disabilities. People with disabilities have to be better.” To young adults with disabilities she says, “If you have something that makes it difficult for you to do your job, find out where you excel. Maybe it’s better social skills, maybe it’s better tech skills. Then leverage that strength. Trade it off for what you’re not so good at. As part of a team you can negotiate complementary skills.” That ability to negotiate these kinds of trade-offs requires additional skills in communication, self-awareness, and self-advocacy.

### Self-Advocacy

“The best thing you [educators and parents] can do is teach people to advocate for themselves,” says Mazrui. “And to communicate.”

Anita Lee Wright agrees. A manager of business development for Northrop Grumman Mission Systems, Wright is also an advocate for diversity and inclusion in her company and committed to “helping people overcome environmental obstacles to being better at their work. We want to see people excel. There’s talent in every person. Everyone should have the opportunity to advocate for themselves . . . and if they are unable to do so, for others to advocate for them.”

As a business representative committed to workforce diversity and the advancement of employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, she was appointed by the California Secretary of Health and Human Services to the board of the California Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (CCEPD). She encourages individuals to develop their communication skills for networking and exploring opportunities. It is important, she says, to “effectively communicate how you can contribute to the company. You also need to be able to educate others about your disability as it relates to the job—so that you are in an environment that enables you to perform to the best of your ability.

“We rely on schools to prepare people for the workforce— to be their own advocates, express their needs, and know their passion.” People with disabilities “need experience doing this while they are students.”

For Mazrui, self-awareness and self-advocacy also involve being “honest to yourself about how your disability can create problems.” Mazrui’s disability makes it impossible for her to recognize the faces of people she works with. She admits to them that she finds it easy to remember details about their personal lives but still can’t recognize them visually. “You need to be honest about your imperfections. It’s more important to be

honest than perfect. Letting people know that you can't see well enough to recognize them is far less harmful to a work relationship than having the other person believe that you are dissing them.”

## **Relationships**

Developing relationships on the job—within and outside of formal teams—also turns out to be critical for job success. Mazrui speaks about the importance of intentionally creating a support system for yourself when you are part of “a group that is a minority. The world is not fair. You will find people who are prejudiced or have an unconscious bias. Working in the same place with them can be annoying or frustrating, especially when you feel like you have to be the educator all the time. You need your support group as a place to vent and to laugh. It can help you learn techniques to develop the relationships you're trying to develop with your other colleagues in order to provide perspective and place events in context—even to find a sense of humor about things.

“It's always better to assume a good intent. And then if you find a pattern”—of discrimination, bullying, or inappropriateness—“address the issue. But you have to remember that not everyone has had the same education and exposure that you've had—about correct terms, for example. You can find a joking way to correct them, or a serious and respectful way to explain the offense. Your support group can help you navigate these situations.” As can the ability to communicate effectively.

Wright suggests “asking a potential employer if Employee Resource Groups or Affinity Groups are available to help new employees onboard and build a network of individuals with common interests or concerns.” She actively supports the development of these kinds of groups, in part because she sees them as contributing to job stability for people with disabilities. Members of disability advocacy groups can “help each other network, develop professionally, and even recruit other candidates.” Northrop Grumman has credibility in this area. The company was recognized by Disability:In as the 2017 Employee Resource Group of the Year for disability inclusion in the workplace.

## **Positive Attitude**

Wright also counsels students to intentionally develop “a positive attitude” to improve their chances of employment success. “Learn how to be part of a team, and network to meet new people. Better understand what's important to you and connect to the right people to learn the skills you need in order to grow.” A sincere interest to learn, she believes, is particularly important. “You may find that a job turns out to be very different from what you expected it to be. Focus on your abilities, and be aware of your strengths—as well as the areas where you are challenged. Rather than responding negatively to feedback or an idea that is rejected, turn it into a learning opportunity.

“If being very systematic is your strength, use that strength,” she says, to learn strategies, processes, and coping mechanisms to replace a negative thought with positive alternatives—“to work in a way that benefits you and the company.”

## **Diversity**

As it turns out, being able to consider and use diverse opinions is a company asset as well as a personal strength. Wright has seen how “the diversity of thought that comes from a diverse workforce” makes companies stronger and better at solving problems. Again, she and Mazrui are on the same page. “With diverse thinking and inclusive environments,” says Mazrui, “we deliver better products and find better solutions to any product or process. It's the diversity of thought that leads to a broadening of perspectives and to new ideas.”

Research confirms diversity's competitive edge. (Hong & Page, 2004). If you bring together a homogeneous group of the best problem solvers, they “perform little better than any one of them individually.” But when a group of problem solvers represents diverse backgrounds and experiences, that group delivers “a wider range of approaches to problem solving, generates more solutions, and offers more ways to back out of dead ends” (Page, 2007).

## Growth Mindset

Wright worked with Jack Canfield on a video training program for California's welfare recipients. One of the basics of the program was an easy-to-remember equation:  $E + R = O$  (Environment + Response = Outcomes), which she believes is an invaluable credo for students with disabilities. "Know what is within your reach and what is your responsibility—basically what you have control over. Then know the outcome you're seeking." Wright believes that when you act with this formula in mind, "whatever happens in your life, you can influence the outcome." We rarely get the exact outcome we want. But when you identify "what's in your control, then you can make the outcome more in line with what you're seeking."

The practice of intentionally choosing how you respond to what happens to you (by being more curious than upset, for example) and what your attitude is to what happens—especially to an event that is unexpected or undesirable (at least at first)—evokes the work of Carol Dweck on growth mindset (Mindset Works, n.d.). Wright is a fan. "If you think, 'I can do this,' then you can turn a potentially negative event into an adventure, a learning experience, something positive."

There is an old saying in the world of employment: "Hire for character, train for competence." People with disabilities have to overcome many barriers in school, society, and the workplace. They "often need to demonstrate extraordinary levels of persistence, resilience, and ingenuity . . . and demonstrate exceptional character features and traits" (The Commerce Board, 2013) It's never too early for parents and educators to help students practice these skills—and set them up for workplace success. ◀

## Resources

- ▶ *Helping Youth Develop Soft Skills for Job Success: Tips for Parents and Families* is at [http://www.ncwd-youth.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/infobrief\\_issue28\\_0.pdf](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/infobrief_issue28_0.pdf)
- ▶ *Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success*, a curriculum from the Office of Disability Employment Policy, is at <http://lifeafterieps.com/free-resource-for-teaching-employment-soft-skills/>

## Note

Jack Canfield produced a video training program (the Goals Program) for California welfare recipients, which has been responsible for helping more 450,000 people get off welfare.

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## Build Inclusion Everywhere!

*by Beth Foraker, Educator and Founder/Director of The National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion*

We sat around the table in a small school office. There were five of us. My tenth grader Patrick and I; then, the school psychologist, the school counselor, and the inclusion specialist, who let us know that they believed Patrick could graduate with a high school diploma.

My son with Down syndrome had the skills and the ability to graduate with a high school diploma!

People like to say that Patrick must be exceptional. He must be the gifted and talented kid with Down syndrome. That simply is not true. Patrick has been afforded what I call the Golden Equation: Opportunity + Access + Support + Belief in his Ability = Sweet Spot of Inclusion

That's it.

When the team offered that gust of hope of graduating with a diploma, there came with it a cold, warning breeze; the transition services offered by the school district for students from age 18-21 were not appropriate for Patrick. The team did not feel that the programs were inclusive enough or challenging enough . . . they thought Patrick could do more. The team recommended graduating with a diploma at age 18. They recommended leaving the school system at age 18.

If Patrick was able to accomplish the amazing, incredible academic feat of graduating with a California high school diploma, he would be kicked out of the school system that had been part of his life since he was three years old. That meant no supports as he transitioned to adulthood. We'd have to figure it out ourselves.

The unspoken question: If the transition services were not appropriate, what was? It didn't feel like the IEP team had any real answers.

For families who have children who have intellectual disabilities, this fragile time after high school is called The Cliff. We can feel it coming. Dread it. Fear it. Can't picture what it really means. All we know is that the road is lonely and the options are few.

Patrick and I began to look around. Searching the Internet, we discovered Think College—the clearinghouse of information for the hundreds of postsecondary college options in the United States. In California, a state with 36 million people and 66,000 students who are transition age, there are 15 programs that provide services for young adults with disabilities. That may sound like a lot but in fact, it is shockingly few options for so many worthy students.

It turns out that The Cliff is HUGE.

Patrick had seen his big brother and big sister head off to college. They both attended four-year universities that were dynamic and vibrant. They both found a college that fit them and welcomed them. They thrived. Patrick, watching from home, thought that college looked pretty great.

We turned our attention to the programs in the country that offer four-year inclusive college programs for people with intellectual disabilities that included inclusive living. NONE of them is in California.

Some might ask—even my own family did—why would you think college is a good fit for Patrick? Can he really get anything out of it? He's not going to be graduating with a degree. So why bother?

Here's the data: People who attend college have better financial outcomes. They have better health. They are more civically engaged. People who attend college and live away from home learn how to live in a big, diverse world because they have practice in the smaller microcosm called college. College is a path to freedom. But it is even more than that for students like Patrick. College is a way out of social isolation.

Students with intellectual disabilities live a life of social isolation. They have fewer authentic friendships. They have fewer life experiences where they navigate the ins and outs of relationships—romantic or otherwise. They rarely get to make their own decisions. Heck, they receive less eye contact, less physical contact, and less

verbal conversation, even if they are out in the real world. The outside world does a good job of tolerating people with intellectual disabilities but a terrible job of really offering them a sense of belonging.

Inclusive living at college provides these important opportunities in a natural, organic environment. Friendships bubble up. Social experiences that never could be predicted or planned just happen. Students with intellectual disabilities are given the opportunity to try things they never would have typically been exposed to. In short, they experience what the typical college student experiences . . . a whole new world.

Patrick applied to three inclusive college programs that offered inclusive living. All of them were four-year programs, and all of them were out of state. He was given an interview at two. He was accepted at George Mason University and into their Mason LIFE program!

None of us really knew if Patrick would be successful going all the way across the country to college. We couldn't picture it or imagine the details. My husband, who had not been on the search with us, was all of a sudden unsure. The truth was—I was too. Only Patrick seemed perfectly comfortable with the idea.

I told my husband that he needed to be 100 percent on board. We would attend the orientation and see what he thought.

Mason LIFE's orientation happened concurrently with the orientation for all of the other typical George Mason students. Patrick got his ID card. We learned about the curriculum. We went through the nitty-gritty details of health care, what happens in an emergency, living arrangements, everything. Throughout the two days, the director of the program treated Patrick and the other students with dignity and equity. The rest of the faculty offered support and expertise. My husband stood in the back of the room with tears rolling down his cheeks.

The cliff didn't seem so big anymore.

Patrick moved into his college dorm with three other people, two other Mason LIFE students and a mechanical engineering major who serves as a resident advisor. Patrick's first few months of college have been indescribable . . . but I will try to put my heart on this page.

For the first time in Patrick's life, he has a community where he BELONGS fully. He is supported, encouraged, provided opportunity, and given access, all while the people around him believe in his ability. It's been the sweet spot of inclusion, that just-right level of support in a balancing act. Sometimes it's too tight, sometimes it's too loose. But here's a group of people committed to figuring it out. He is all the way across the country, and he's never been happier.

Just a few weeks ago, I got a video phone call from Patrick. It was dark and I could barely see his face. I asked him what he was doing. With adventure and pride in his voice he announced that he was in an Uber with a friend on his way to a Superbowl Party!

I could never have backwards planned the many skills Patrick would need to take an Uber to a Superbowl Party with a friend. More importantly, I wouldn't have thought that was something important to plan for. Inclusive college is allowing Patrick to develop the skills to live life HIS WAY. It allows him to seize the moment and try something new. HE is able to prioritize what matters to him.

So Patrick maneuvers through a tier 1 research university with thousands of other students to find the place HE wants to eat. Or study. Or hang out.

## **Expanding the Continuum**

In our journey to find a college for Patrick, we visited Fresno State's two-year Wayfinders Program, which has inclusive living. It was amazing to see this program in person. The director asked about Patrick's school experience.

She explained that many students spend their time in high school in segregated settings and are not prepared for the inclusivity of college. She also mentioned that the surrounding school districts were segregated for students like Patrick, and that it was rare for those students to be able to take advantage of this

amazing opportunity right in their hometown.

The city of Fresno has one chunk of what I call a Continuum of Inclusion. It has the inclusive college chunk. But it was missing the inclusive preschool through eighth grade chunk and the inclusive high school chunk. I live in a city that has two pieces of the continuum. The school district in Davis has been fully inclusive since the 1960's. That means we have the preschool through high school pieces . . . but without an inclusive college option. So many of the students in our city fall off the cliff.

When you have the entire continuum, there is no cliff.

With a full continuum of inclusion, inclusive adulthood—inclusive living and employment opportunities—becomes possible. When inclusion starts in infancy and extends into adulthood, momentum is created, and an inclusive life is possible. In California, 66,000 students are waiting on the sidelines.

We must educate our kids for a world we can't imagine . . . that's the world they will be given. We must work to create a world where our kids—ALL kids—can thrive and live the life THEY imagine. We all are worthy of a chance to fly...not to fall off a cliff. Continuums of inclusion, with inclusive college programs that offer inclusive living, are the wings we need. ◀

## The Importance of High Expectations

When teachers hold high expectations for certain students, those students make significantly greater gains in intellectual growth than their classmates (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This was the conclusion of the famous “Pygmalion in the Classroom” study from 1968. Research continues to confirm the finding (Education Commission of the States, 2012), but there are more benefits to high expectations than improved school outcomes. High expectations also promote resilience in children who are considered “at risk” (Saffigna, Church, & Tayler, 2011)—a category that often includes students with disabilities.

Decades after the passage of IDEA, the U.S. Congress found that the law’s “implementation . . . has been impeded by low expectations” [20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(4)]. Low expectations continue to contribute to poor employment rates, and negatively impact postsecondary outcomes. Low expectations—on the part of parents, teachers, and the students themselves—prevent students from believing in—and realizing—their full potential (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2017).

What do high expectations look like for students with disabilities? For most, they are identical to the high expectations held for all students. “In fact, 86 percent of students in special education have mild disabilities and function much like anyone else in society. What they primarily lack is the self-confidence and support to plot their own course in life,” writes David Johnson, director of the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota (Johnson, 2015).

Parents are key. Parental expectations—placed high and set early—prove to be a stronger predictor of post-school success than any other factor, (Ginsburg, Block, & McWayne, 2010). including demographics and skill levels. Even such basic tasks as tooth brushing and bed making, and certainly more involved tasks such as helping to prepare dinner and launder clothes, help children develop a sense of responsibility, independence, and agency in the world. This finding applies to all students, regardless of disability. In fact, high parental expectations increase the odds of post-school employment by more than three-fold (TASH, 2016).

Educators are also critical in:

- Providing inclusive, rigorous academic instruction
- Reinforcing parents as much as students



- Promoting self-advocacy
- Promoting students' self-awareness of their strengths and their disability
- Holding students accountable while providing necessary supports as students work toward mastery and independence

Intentionally promoting a growth mindset also contributes to students setting higher expectations for themselves. A student with a growth mindset has learned (and ideally is surrounded by people who believe) that no one's intelligence or ability is "fixed"; that people can get smarter and improve their skills with time, patience, the right strategies, and allies; and that such qualities as effort, grit, and self-awareness contribute as much—or more—to success as raw talent or luck.

A growth mindset coupled with high expectations supports the fact that we all can learn and improve our skills—and cultivate new ones—not just during our school years but throughout our lives. ◀

## Resource

- ▶ *Resolution on High Expectations for Students with Disabilities*, from the National PTA, is at <https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/ptas-positions/Individual-PTA-Resolutions/resolution-on-high-expectations-for-students-with-disabilities>
- ▶ Growth Mindset and Its Impact on Special Needs is at <http://impactofspecialneeds.weebly.com/growth-mindset.html>

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## Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning is a process of discovering how an individual wants to live his life, learning his strengths and abilities, determining the supports he requires to live that life, and then creating a plan to make that life possible. The focus is on the person, not on the disability or the services available. There are five main elements in a person-centered planning process:

1. The person is at the center—chooses whom to include in the process and is consulted throughout the process.
2. The person's family members and friends are partners in the plan.
3. The plan reflects what is important to the person.
4. The plan sets in action events that reflect what is possible and desired, not just what is available.
5. The plan is a living document. It changes in response to how the person and circumstances change.

Those involved in person-center planning are challenged to be flexible, sensitive, and committed to the dreams of the person who is at the plan's center. The

process can be readily incorporated into an IEP meeting. The following resources will help.

- ▶ *A Parent Brief: Person-Centered Planning* from NCSET is at <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1431>
- ▶ *Increasing Person-Centered Thinking: Improving the Quality of Person-Centered Planning* is at <https://rtc.umn.edu/docs/pcpmanual1.pdf>

