

Promoting High Expectations for Post-School Success by Family Members: A “To Do” List for Professionals

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Abstract

Parental expectations (having high expectations for their children) and parental involvement (having parents as active and knowledgeable participants in transition planning) have been identified as evidence-based predictors of improved post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. However, little is known about how education professionals can support and promote high expectations and involvement of families for their transition-aged youth with disabilities. Parent advocates for students with disabilities across the nation were asked for their ideas. The following provides a “to-do” list of 7 strategies and 13 activities special education professionals can use in partnership with families to promote high expectations for post-school success for young adults with disabilities.

Promoting High Expectations for Post-School Success by Family Members: A “To Do” List for Professionals

On the path to high expectations, there were way too many times we felt like we had to temporarily “settle” for a lowered expectation. We have been through countless cycles of setting an expectation, advocating and working towards it, lowering the expectation—usually based on systems-realities, revising and/or redefining the expectation, investigating, marshalling and sometimes creating new resources, and giving it all we could. (Parent Advocate)

Parental expectations (i.e., having high expectations for their children) and parental involvement (i.e., parents as active and knowledgeable participants in transition planning) have been identified as an evidence-based predictor of improved post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2015; Test et al., 2009). However, little is known about how education professionals can support and promote high expectations and involvement of families for their transition-aged youth with disabilities.

To respond to this issue, 25 parent advocates (i.e., parents of high school students or young adults with disabilities, as well as special education professionals) from across the nation (i.e., The Beach Center, Exceptional Children’s Assistance Center, Center for Parent Information and Resources, PACER, Cleveland County Schools) answered a set of questions including: (a) how their expectations for their child’s future had changed over time? (b) how

their expectations for support from education professionals had changed over time? (c) what professionals could do to align secondary transition programming with their high expectations? and (d) what made them feel like a valued member of their child’s planning and support team? Special education professionals were defined as any person (e.g., special education teachers, transition specialists, administrators, related services professionals) who could be involved in the transition planning and support activities. These responses were sorted by the authors into major strategies with activities for accomplishing each strategy. Strategies and activities were then combined and refined until all authors reached agreement. This process resulted in seven strategies and 13 activities for encouraging education professionals to partner with families to promote high expectations for post-school success. The following provides a “to-do” list of the strategies and activities special education professionals can use in partnership with families to promote high expectations for post-school success for young adults with disabilities and Table 1 provides a list of website resources not included below that can be used as additional supports.

Strategy 1: Engage Parents in Training Opportunities in a Variety of Formats to Address Transition Related School and Adult Support Services, Eligibility, and Access

Expose parents to adult service providers no later than the first year of high school to educate them about supports and resources available during and after high school for their child. Understanding the supports available can raise expectations by increasing the comfort and confidence level with future service providers. (Parent Advocate)

Information is power! Often family members feel powerless when thinking about their young adult’s future because they do not know what to expect and they are not familiar with available resources. Information can help level the playing field. Knowing about the availability of services such as supported employment through Vocational Rehabilitation, disability supports in college, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) work incentives and care coordination through Medicaid Waiver programs, self-employment, or postsecondary education programs for young adults with intellectual disabilities can alleviate fears about life after high school graduation.

Special education professionals should make a targeted effort to educate family members about transition and what it means for their young adult which can potentially increase meaningful involvement in the planning process. Also, the level of support provided to the young person can be enhanced by family members who understand how to access services in the school setting, the adult service venue, and the community.

Activity: Distribute information to families.

Use multiple approaches to provide information. First, ensure brochures, flyers, website links, and contact information for agencies are provided to family members in accessible user-friendly formats using appropriate language. Second, refer families to state or local transition websites with relevant information, and provide access to computers in school for families without internet access. Third, provide updated contact lists of agency representatives who can provide information about the application process and eligibility requirements for adult services.

Finally, if family members are struggling to understand special education’s transition process, refer them to the nearest federally funded parent training and information center in your state. All states have at least one. (Find yours at www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center.) Parent centers typically employ members of diverse cultural groups able to provide culturally competent information and advocacy assistance to family members who do not speak English. A range of disability-specific advocacy organizations (e.g., Arc, Autism Society, United Cerebral Palsy) are also able to provide information and training focusing on transition issues particularly relevant to a student’s exact disability.

Activity: Arrange for family members to have face-to-face contact with adult service agency representatives.

First, ensure adult service providers attend IEP meetings for students who will need post-school support. Facilitate interagency planning that involves family members by establishing a system-wide framework for supporting collaboration and coordination during postsecondary planning (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2014). Following IEP meetings, assist family members in arranging additional meetings with adult service representatives and/or agency tours. Encourage family members and adult service providers to develop relationships prior to the student's graduation from high school.

Second, sponsor a transition and/or agency fair for agencies to display their information in an informal manner (e.g., booths) to provide an opportunity for family members to learn about support services offered by adult providers related to employment, further education, and community participation. Also, families can begin to learn how to assist their young adults in accessing these services if professionals provide guiding questions or checklists for families to use when talking with agency representatives. For a toolkit about transition fairs, see: http://www.transitionta.org/sites/default/files/Transition_Fair_Toolkit.pdf

Strategy 2: Partner with Families to Explore Role Models

I would venture to say the majority of families who have children with significant support needs have never known another person with similar needs who had what they consider to be an “enviable life” in adulthood. Without a frame of reference, parents may have a very limited vision of what the future can be. Providing youth and their families with opportunities to connect with adults with disabilities can be an empowering, even transformative, experience. (Parent Advocate)

Throughout a child's educational career, family members may be exposed to discouraging assumptions that limit future possibilities. Hopefully, they will also hear about opportunities and options for their child's future from professionals. However, hearing about the possibilities and seeing the actualities are very different things. The following activities can be used by professionals to provide families with access to supports that produce postsecondary results and individuals who have achieved their postsecondary dreams (Landmark, Zhang, & Montoya, 2007).

Activity: Connect students and families with successful adults with disabilities.

First, arrange for successful alumni to serve as classroom speakers, mentors, mock interviewers, and/or attend transition-related events. Spotlight youth (with permission) who have succeeded in areas of post-school life such as gaining employment, attending college, obtaining certifications, and living independently. Next, use social media, the local newspaper, special events, and websites to share and celebrate achievements with as broad an audience as possible. Third, introduce families and youth to Centers for Independent Living, and advocacy organizations run by adults with disabilities, which offer services such as peer-to-peer mentoring and training for youth with disabilities. Finally, provide appropriately vetted books, movies, blogs, and videos that portray the benefits of high expectations on post-secondary goals.

Activity: Set up a family support group focused on transition issues.

Bringing families of students and graduates together to discuss, educate, and support can result in the exchange of ideas, solutions, and encouragement. Fears that might suppress high expectations can be alleviated by talking to others who have overcome the same fears. First, a family support group could be established as a division of a school's PTO/PTA. By collaborating with adult provider agencies parents of successfully transitioned young people could come together with parents of middle and high school students. In addition, some states have

gone beyond informal social events to formalized parent mentoring programs using evidence-based practices through Parent to Parent USA. Their website provides information about matching trained Support Parents with families seeking support (www.p2pusa.org).

Strategy 3: Interact Respectfully with Each Family According to Their Unique Cultural-Linguistic Differences and Priorities

Each parent is different – their backgrounds are different; their child’s cognitive, physical, and behavioral circumstances are different; how professionals and their communities relate to them are different; and their willingness to accept or challenge external opinions of their child’s future are different. (Parent Advocate)

Families of youth with disabilities have varied backgrounds, beliefs, and values. A growing number come from disadvantaged or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Family members may have had negative, little, or no experience with formal education. Schools serving high numbers of youth with disabilities who are also English Language Learners face additional challenges in understanding perspectives. Using interpreters can increase the degree of communication and understanding so viewpoints of all parties are taken into consideration during planning. To cultivate high expectations for all youth with disabilities and their families, professional development can support educators to become proactive about developing culturally responsive skills and family engagement strategies (Kim & Morningstar, 2005).

In many western cultures, self-advocacy aligns with the value of independence and self-reliance; however, other cultures value contributions to the family well-being over the individual. If the focus on independent living in the transition planning process does not align with a family’s traditional goals, educators can still share information about the benefits of high expectations. The following activities can be used to demonstrate how strengthening a student’s advocacy skills, going onto further education, or finding employment might be advantageous to their family or community (Wehmeyer, 2014).

Activity: Talk with members of other cultures for advice on typical expectations.

Ask members of other cultures about their values and beliefs to develop communication and support strategies that respond to specific social, cultural, and linguistic needs and values. Remember individual families can vary in the degree to which they have adopted both traditional and majority culture values concerning work and independence.

Activity: Give family members from other cultures an opportunity to discuss their personal belief system in relationship to IDEA expectations for transition.

Strive to develop a trusting relationship in dialogue with families. Whether through telephone conversations, face-to-face meetings, or email, invite families to share their cultural values, priorities, and concerns. Seek to understand each family’s unique expectations for their son or daughter.

Strategy 4: Begin Planning for Transition Early, Engaging Families as Partners to Build a Robust Transition IEP and Empower Them as Allies

It is never too early to begin teaching children to make choices and assume responsibility. By 5th or 6th grade goals for self-advocacy should be incorporated into the IEP. A student’s participation in the IEP meeting provides a natural opportunity to learn and practice self-advocacy skills. Seeing their youth become involved in and taking increasing responsibility for the IEP can help families see their child’s growing ability to direct their own life. (Parent Advocate)

The IEP meeting is the focal point for transition planning. School personnel who strategically welcome families' participation take time to understand discouraging past experiences, as well as future dreams (Hirano & Rowe, 2016). The following activities can be used to build trusting relationships, guide families' exploration of post-school options, and encourage high expectations.

Activity: Seek family buy-in for transition planning.

Ensure families understand that entitlement to special education services ends upon graduation and the importance of their role in collaborative planning. Help them to see that effective transition planning will guide activities and services for the whole IEP. Encourage families to contribute their perspectives to transition assessments and their recommendations for transition activities. The results of formal and informal assessments should be shared with the young person and family members to develop a personalized profile that clearly outlines abilities as they relate to the student's post-school goals. Expectations can be raised through the process of identifying where a young person is now and what they need to do to accomplish their post-school goals.

Activity: Use student-led IEPs to engage families.

In many locations, families partner with schools in supporting students to practice self-determination skills by leading their IEP meetings. With educator support, students prepare in advance to share their future goals and their personal accomplishments. Each year they assume increasing responsibilities for the IEP meeting and daily activities, such as describing their present levels of performance, supports they need, and even helping to draft their annual goals and benchmarks. Information on research-based curricula for teaching students to lead their IEP meetings can be found at: <http://www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow.html>.

Strategy 5: Partner with Families to Support Their Young Person's Independence

When thinking about transition planning, remember the student's postsecondary goals will ultimately impact the family (e.g., tuition, transportation). Sometimes a family will need assistance in adjusting to their young adult's changing roles. (Parent Advocate)

As students progress in school, they also develop behaviors and habits they will carry into adult life. The efforts of educational professionals to support youth development of appropriate adult behaviors can be multiplied by partnership with their families. As such, family knowledge of the youth's home behaviors, experiences, and community supports can make a significant contribution to transition planning. Their commitment to youth self-sufficiency and their perspectives on what is possible for their youth can also expand by actively participating in the transition process (Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007). The following activity may be used to increase a young person's independence.

Activity: Support families to reinforce soft skills and identify natural supports.

First, recognize that families are instrumental in helping youth develop life skills and mindsets that impact adulthood. Suggest ways families can use everyday activities in the home, including regular chores, budgeting, medical appointments, and household problem-solving to build basic employability and life skills.

Second, work closely with young people and their families to identify naturally occurring supports. Collaboratively help family members discover areas where they no longer need to be the primary caregiver. For example, Uncle Jose can help with obtaining and maintaining a car. Older sister Sharman can give advice on enrolling and attending the community college. A neighbor who works for the Department of Social Services can help with the SSI process when the student turns 18. Expectations for post-school success can be increased by identifying and mapping out natural supports and using this information to build a circle of support for a young person that does not require funding or laws to ensure their existence and will endure beyond the parents' lifetime.

Strategy 6. Empower Families to Trust Their Instincts about Their Youth's Future and Help Them Build a Network of Support

From the earliest years, families often get feedback when they state something positive about their child's current or future life trajectory that they are "being unrealistic" and that they are "in denial." Many professionals feel as if it would be a disservice to families to give them "false hope." I worry far more about "false despair" as contrasted to "false hope." Many families are enveloped in "false despair," and their coping strategy is "to take a day at a time" rather than to think about the future. (Parent Advocate)

All parents have hopes and dreams that their children will achieve great things. When parents have a child with a disability, goals might need to be modified. This does not mean expecting less, but it may mean expecting something different than what parents had originally envisioned. Educators should be prepared to support families to hold fast to high expectations.

Professionals can empower families to trust their own instincts about their youth's potential by equipping family members with clear, easy to understand requirements for various pathways to high school graduation and their career goals (e.g., college entrance requirements, training for specific occupations; Hirano & Rowe, 2016). The following activities may help them align the student's course of study with post-school objectives and translate high expectations into achievable goals.

Activity: Involve related service providers in planning meetings.

Encourage families to link with other school-based professionals. First, school guidance counselors can provide information to ensure students take all courses needed for high school graduation and all prerequisites needed to be accepted into a postsecondary program associated with their career goal. If needed, a counselor can help students and families identify careers in the same pathway that require a less demanding course of study (e.g., a vet tech instead of a veterinarian).

Next, Career Technical Education (CTE) staff can provide information about high school, as well as postsecondary education programs required for various vocational and technical careers, to help families and youth consider whether a CTE career pathway would be a good fit. CTE programs can be an effective pathway to high school graduation for many students with disabilities (Hehir, Dougherty, & Grindal, 2013).

Activity: Assist families in understanding the process that allows students to receive special education services until they graduate with a diploma or age out.

Ensure families participate in decisions about whether their student needs more than the typical four years of high school to achieve their transition goals by considering how their student's course of study could be adapted to a five or six year plan if needed. Ensure students and families understand that students must postpone accepting her or his diploma in order to access transition services beyond their senior year of high school.

Strategy 7. Work with Families to Support Students' School Years Success in all Domains; Academic, Recreational, Extracurricular, Spiritual, and Community Participation

Encourage families to have their youth participate in school or community-based activities that promote teamwork and leadership. These might include student government, the school newspaper, environmental club, or serving on a youth board of a local non-profit organization. Many youth with disabilities who struggle with academics excel in other areas such as sports or the arts. These interests can help them explore their strengths and may lead them to career pathways in these fields. (Parent Advocate)

The intent of transition planning is that graduating students with disabilities will successfully transition into employment, further education, independent living, and community participation (Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015). While the school may primarily focus on academic and career-related preparation, families may take the lead on engaging students in other community activities to round out their development. The following activity can be used to help parents begin investigating school and community options based on their youth's individual interests.

Activity: Compile list of school and community engagement options.

First, share a list of school clubs, recreational, and extracurricular activities, including details about schedule, cost, and materials needed for participation as well as contact information for use by youth and families. Remember schools are legally responsible for providing accommodations and supports for participation in non-academic activities that offer opportunities for students to build peer relationships and skills for successful transition. Partner with families within the IEP team process to include relevant personnel (e.g., coaches and club sponsors) in planning for these activities (Ankeny, Wilkens, & Spain, 2009).

Second, survey students to identify community opportunities they currently participate in now and expand the list. Include local youth organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, Scouts, and 4-H, which often have supports for individuals with disabilities. Contact your interagency transition council, colleges, and nonprofit organizations to locate volunteer opportunities.

Conclusion

I learned the importance of relationships and the need for all adults to be working together towards a common goal; success for the student. This means throwing out pre-conceived notions and truly looking at each student's unique and individual needs and providing services responsive to those needs. Once our team started to operate from that perspective, we started to see success.
(Parent Advocate)

The strategies and activities suggested above by parent advocates can assist education professionals in partnering with families to promote high expectations for post-school success for their young adults. After all, collaboration is the key to any successful transition.

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Table 1

Additional Website Resources
<p>Strategy 1: Engage Parents in Training Opportunities in a Variety of Formats to Address Transition Related School and Adult Support Services, Eligibility, and Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vocational rehabilitation services: http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/vr• Transition information for families: http://www.pacer.org/transition
<p>Strategy 2: Partner with Families to Explore Role Models</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to support youth self-advocacy: http://www.sabeusa.org/• Stories from the ADA Generation: http://iel.org/ada-generation
<p>Strategy 3: Interact Respectfully with Each Family According to Their Unique Cultural-Linguistic Differences and Priorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supporting multicultural families: http://multiculturalfamilies.org/wordpress/• Transition and cultural diversity: http://transitioncoalition.org/blog/welcome-cultural-diversity/
<p>Strategy 4: Begin Planning for Transition Early, Engaging Families as Partners to Build a Robust Transition IEP and Empower Them as Allies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disability disclosure process: http://www.ncwd-youth.info/411-on-disability-disclosure• Youth planning for their future: http://www.ncwd-youth.info/guiding-your-success• Parents’ role in IEP meetings: http://www.specialeducationguide.com/blog/understanding-the-parents-role-in-iep-meetings/• Developing self-determination for youth and families: www.imdetermined.org
<p>Strategy 5: Partner with Families to Support Their Young Person’s Independence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using household jobs to learn soft skills: http://www.myjobchart.com/• Soft skills for job success: http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-28
<p>Strategy 6: Empower Families to Trust Their Instincts about Their Youth’s Future and Help Them Build a Network of Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graduation and diploma options: http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-22• Disability Rights: http://www.wrightslaw.com/
<p>Strategy 7: Work with Families to Support Students’ School Years Success in all Domains; Academic, Recreational, Extracurricular, Spiritual, and Community Participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Age of majority: http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/age-of-majority• Independent living and housing: http://www.pacer.org/housing/• Independence with healthcare: http://hscj.ufl.edu/jaxhats/docs/HCT_Workbook_18up.pdf• College life for youth with disabilities: http://www.going-to-college.org/• Community activities and resources: https://www.unitedway.org/find-your-united-way