

Overcoming Transportation Barriers to Employment

Transportation is a vital but often under-addressed component of transition planning for students with disabilities. Reliable, accessible transportation makes it possible for students to access employment, participate in job training, and engage fully in community life. However, many transition plans focus on academic or vocational goals without addressing how students will physically get to and from those opportunities. When transportation barriers are not addressed early—during high school—they can significantly limit a young person's options after graduation. For students with disabilities, transportation is more than a logistical concern; it is a determining factor in whether they can participate in meaningful postsecondary experiences, including employment (Bezyak et al., 2020; Tessier et al., 2023).

What Role Does Transportation Play in Employment?

For students with disabilities, transportation is a linchpin connecting education to meaningful employment. Without reliable, affordable, and accessible transportation, even the best career preparation can fall short. Barriers such as inaccessible routes, unreliable service, or lack of support from family and friends often limit job opportunities or cause students to turn down or leave employment (Tessier et al., 2023, 2024). At the same time, transportation solutions—like independent travel skills, supportive employers, and knowledgeable educators—can greatly enhance employment access and retention by fostering confidence, reducing commuting stress, and promoting inclusion in the workforce (Tessier et al., 2024).

What the Research Says

Research from Tessier et al. (2023, 2024) and Bezyak et al. (2020) highlight how transportation

barriers affect employment outcomes across multiple dimensions. A lack of accessible transportation infrastructure—such as sidewalks, curb ramps, and reliable bus or paratransit service—limits opportunities for individuals with disabilities to commute independently to work. These physical and organizational gaps in infrastructure disproportionately affect those in rural or underserved areas and contribute to job loss or reduced participation in the labor market (Tessier et al., 2023; Bezyak et al., 2020).

In addition to these physical barriers, the social environment surrounding transportation can either support or hinder access. Negative attitudes from drivers or other passengers, a lack of disability awareness among professionals who provide transportation, and low expectations from families or schools can inhibit students from traveling independently (Tessier et al., 2024; Bezyak et al., 2020). Conversely, when educators, employers, and transit providers offer appropriate support—such as flexible schedules, accessible job locations, or travel training—students are more likely to pursue and maintain employment. Confidence and experience also matter; students with structured opportunities to practice using public transportation report greater self-efficacy and are more likely to transition successfully into work-based learning or employment (Tessier et al., 2024).

Guidelines for Practice

Educators play a key role in preparing students with disabilities to overcome transportation barriers. By proactively addressing transportation within the IEP and transition planning process, educators can reduce a major barrier to employment for students with disabilities.

- *Include Transportation in Transition Assessments*
- Include questions about transportation needs, current use, confidence, and goals in

age-appropriate transition assessments. This allows IEP teams to plan intentionally for transportation access.

- **Teach Travel Skills** - Provide instruction in community-based navigation, route planning, safety strategies, and the use of public transit apps. Collaborate with families to support gradual independence.
- **Promote Self-Advocacy** - Help students practice explaining their transportation needs and preferences to employers, transit staff, and support providers. Encourage role-playing and real-world scenarios.
- **Coordinate with Families and Agencies** - Facilitate discussions between students, families, vocational rehabilitation, and transit providers to explore options like travel training, reduced-fare programs, or paratransit eligibility.
- **Engage with Employers** - Encourage employers to offer flexible schedules or accommodate transportation-related needs.
- **Address Transportation in IEP Goals** - Include measurable annual goals focused on increasing transportation independence.

Additional Resources

Transportation Solutions: Strategies for Getting to Work-Based Learning Sites

<https://ictw.illinois.edu/resources/transportation-guide>

This guide is a compilation of diverse approaches for addressing transportation challenges associated with accessing community work experiences.

Transportation Education Curriculum

<https://www.nadtc.org/resources-publications/resource/transportation-education-curriculum/>

This curriculum focuses on real world transit navigation aligned with transition IEPs.

References

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