

The Importance of Transition Planning in Middle School

Students with disabilities experience higher unemployment rates, participate in postsecondary education less often, and are less involved within their communities upon completion from high school compared to students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). To improve employment outcomes for students with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that a transition component be included in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for students with disabilities no later than age 16. However, more than half of all states have chosen to begin transition planning earlier. In the state of Illinois, the Illinois school code governing special education mandates that transition planning for students with disabilities shall begin no later than the first IEP in effect when the student turns age 14.5 (23 IAC 226.230). Since many students reach that age while still in middle school, special education teachers who work with middle school students are responsible not only for developing and implementing the student's first transition plan but also incorporating transition skill practices into their daily instruction.

Why is Transition Planning in Middle School Important?

The programs and services students with disabilities receive in high school are designed to align with the goals of the transition IEP that is developed in middle school (Test & Grossi, 2011). For middle school students with disabilities, the transition plan becomes a blueprint for how students will access and advance through the secondary curriculum (Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007). The plan provides guidance by identifying a student's instructional needs, services necessary for accessing the secondary curriculum, community experiences needed to achieve post-school goals, and necessary related services. Furthermore, starting transition planning in middle school provides students with additional time to explore their skills in

the classroom and in the community, and to begin to identify future employment aspirations (Test & Grossi, 2011).

What the Research Says

Early transition planning is beneficial for students with disabilities. A study conducted by Cimera et al. (2013) investigated whether students with autism receiving transition services by age 14 had better employment outcomes than students with autism receiving transition services by age 16. The researchers found that students who received transition services by age 14 were significantly more likely to be employed than students receiving transition services by age 16 (i.e., 80.8% compared to 58.9%). Additionally, students who received transition services by age 14 who became employed earned higher wages and cost less to serve. A similar study conducted by Cimera et al. (2014) examined the effects of providing transition services to students with intellectual disability by age 14 compared to students with intellectual disability receiving transition services by age 16. Results from this study indicate that individuals with intellectual disability who received transition services by age 14 were more likely to be employed than students with intellectual disability receiving services by age 16 (i.e., 58.8% compared to 45.6%). Starting transition planning earlier for students with disabilities has also been found to decrease students' feelings of alienation, improve attendance, and decrease dropout (Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007).

Guidelines for Practice

Middle school is an opportune time to begin transition planning and to take steps toward incorporating transition activities in the curriculum. Middle school students must decide what kind of high school diploma (e.g., standard or special) and curriculum (e.g., general education, honors, tech programs) they will pursue, since these decisions

will have an impact on their future employment options. Additionally, career exploration is a crucial component of the middle school curriculum. Middle school students are naturally exploratory in their early adolescence. Therefore, educators can use this opportunity to capitalize on students' openness to explore as well as their need to acquire information that will be used to guide judgments about their high school pathways (Repetto, 2012).

Additional Resources

Middle School Transition Planning Practices
files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592014.pdf

References

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