



FOCUS on Results

Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

June 2008
Accountability
Assessment
Curriculum & Instruction
Dispute Resolution
Early Childhood
IEPs & IFSPs
Personnel
State & Federal Policy
Transition
Other

This FOCUS on Results document represents the collaborative efforts of the Michigan Transition Services Association (MTSA) and the Michigan Transition Outcomes Project (MI-TOP).

Education stakeholders can help each student achieve successful postsecondary outcomes by emphasizing rigorous curriculums that are relevant to the student's postsecondary vision and relationships that support the student's achievement of that vision. The individualized education program (IEP) team must plan for student success by implementing a strategic focus for each student's plan that emphasizes a student-centered vision.

Postsecondary Outcomes: Let's Make Sure Students Are Ready

by Chuck Saur

The assistant principal and members of the individualized education program (IEP) team took their seats. Everyone settled in with coffee cups and pens in place. The IEP sign-in sheet made the rounds, and each member of the group initialed or scratched his or her name on the triplexed paperwork. I sat down next to my wife and son. His wheelchair didn't quite make it under the big table, so he appeared to be sitting a bit off to the side.

"Well everyone..." started the assistant principal, "what classes are we taking this year?"

The Paperwork Is Not the Plan

The above scenario may be familiar to many. Yet, today's educational environment is facing broad changes that impact current IEP meetings. Where will special education be in the future in light of educational reforms such as the *Michigan Merit Curriculum* or with the implementation of support structures such as Response to Intervention (RtI), Educational

Development Plans (EDPs), the personal curriculum (PC) option, and *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB)?

Concepts and practices used to assist students both professionally and personally as they prepare for life beyond high school are changing. Students are encouraged to work on planning for transition out of high school sooner. Educators are working toward collectively answering the question "what are we getting this student ready to do?" Anyone who works directly with students and their parents should ensure, prior to the IEP team meeting, that all student data and information is clearly developed in order to inform IEP team members about the student's vision, including their interests and preferences. If possible, students should give their own voice to these visions. Team members also need to ensure that the IEP is designed with the whole student in mind, including any special circumstances, and that a long-term focus is prevalent in the document (a three-year focus aligns with current thinking regarding educational benefit).



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Each student will leave school and move on to something else. Whether their lives will include meaningful activities they choose, or be filled with nothing but reruns on daytime TV, will be determined by the preparedness level of the student. How seriously we consider these planning activities will affect the quality of a student's life.

Basic Assumptions No Longer Work

Standard forms, created to help guide the IEP process, may help show a logical flow for the purpose of basic information exchange and documentation, but few are designed to function in place of a planning process or meeting agenda. These standard forms have generally missed a well-planned strategic or operational focus. Following the forms alone tends to support a simple "fill-in-the-blank" approach to IEP team meetings, which is no longer sufficient.

The planning process is a basic guidance component or "recipe" often absent in the strategic development of the IEP. IEP team members need to begin thinking creatively and focus on the intended educational benefit for each student—"What are we getting this student ready for, and how?" By definition, there are two basic types of planning processes—the strategic-type plan and the operational-type plan. Understanding the difference is important, because each plan is used for specific reasons. Following are the two types of plans, with examples for each, that can be applied to the IEP process.

Strategic Planning

This planning process is characterized by visionary, directional thinking and describes the framework for carrying out the actions needed to achieve consistent, planned, long-term results. For example, a school district's strategic plan outlines its long-term vision and goals, short-term objectives, and a detailed view of the resources needed to accomplish these goals. The plan is re-visited or re-designed by the school district each year.

Operational Planning

This planning process requires short-term, specific thinking and is triggered by, and linked to, the direction described in the strategic plan. For example, a school district's operational plan is often a monthly or quarterly plan or capital-outlay plan where teachers, principals, and support staff are held accountable to 'get the job done.'

The need to build a long-term, strategic focus into the IEP planning process gets more critical as a student plans his or her exit from school or transition to adult life. For a student who reaches the age of 16, language in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) of 2004 mandates that the IEP become "transition focused." This includes a provision to "consider the student's post-school goals" in planning the "course(s) of study and transition services."

In Michigan, the words "postsecondary vision" describe the set of post-school goals to be considered. Postsecondary vision includes such areas as employment, adult living, community support, and postsecondary education. As plans are made for the student to exit school, or transition to adult life, the student must have a meaningful voice in creating a postsecondary vision for his or her adult life. Optimally, students can be the facilitators of their own IEP team meetings. Having students lead their own IEP team meetings is a positive practice supported by research.

The IEP, driven by the student's transition considerations, should start with a strategic planning process. Team members need to emphasize:

- Development of a well-constructed vision for each student's postsecondary life.
- Effective and compliant IEP documentation that supports students in achieving the requirements necessary to realize their visions.

Doing Things Right: Understanding System Requirements

A consistent process that results in effective transition-IEP planning and positive postsecondary transition for all students is essential to the success of students with disabilities. Toward this goal, the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) changed the annual data reporting process for states. The process now requires states to provide data and improvement plans for specific performance indicators from the State Performance Plan (SPP) directly related to transition (visit www.cenmi.org/specialeducationfacts.asp for information on the SPP indicators). These indicators include the following:

- Indicator 1: Graduation.
- Indicator 2: Dropout.
- Indicator 13: Secondary Transition.
- Indicator 14: Postsecondary Outcomes.

SPP Indicator 13 is specific to secondary transition and requires data collection related to the content and design of the IEP. SPP Indicator 13 reads: "Percent of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the postsecondary goals."

In 2006, a statewide transition compliance checklist was designed and implemented to assess how well Michigan is meeting secondary transition requirements as stated in IDEA 2004 (see Figure 1 on page 4).

Looking through the lens of such federal requirements compounds the need for a strategic approach that allows the IEP team to better define two important points. First, a "starting point for instruction" through assessment, goal setting, and development of the student's

vision for postsecondary life is determined. Second, because of the requirement in Indicator 13 to provide educational services designed to reasonably enable a student to attain the postsecondary vision (in other words, "determine when they're ready for what"), an opportunity to identify the "end point of instruction" (or when it is time to move on from school) also exists. This takes on a long-term, strategic focus.

As a measure for the SPP Indicator 13, the Statewide Transition Compliance Checklist has been used to assess transition-related elements for more than 8,000 IEPs across the state. The 2006-2007 review indicates that only 40 percent of IEPs in Michigan meet the transition requirements of IDEA 2004 (see Figure 2 on page 5).

Using Performance Requirements to Drive the Agenda

By taking cues from the transition compliance checklist and re-framing efforts toward student readiness, an effective, consistent, and strategic agenda for IEP meetings can be constructed. The questions asked in the checklist inform the agenda and ensure that there is a focus on the requirement that IEP content be "coordinated" (aligned to the student's postsecondary vision), "measurable" (meaning that progress can be easily determined), and updated at least "annually."

By keeping this required alignment as a guiding factor to determine the student's vision, course of study, and/or needed transition services in the IEP, a strategic agenda can be set. Additionally, both a student-focused and compliance-tested IEP can be developed.

An example of an IEP agenda that begins with student-focused questions is below. The answers from the student should begin to set the strategic direction for an IEP that aligns with the postsecondary vision. The recording of the discussion should also be done within the framework of the transition-focused IEP.

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The Center for Educational Networking (CEN) is a statewide education information network that produces and disseminates publications and documents related to the education of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).



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There are certainly guiding questions that need to be explored when building this agenda into the IEP process.

- Can compliance be achieved by adopting a student-centered agenda?
- Will this agenda help students learn the value of exploring and articulating their vision as a starting point for their education?
- Can the requirements that each student needs to master in order to achieve his or her vision be clearly assessed and specified?
- Can it be accurately assessed when a student is "ready to move on"?

Figure 1: Student Focused Agenda

What is my vision for my life when I am done with school?

- Where and how am I going to live?
- What job or career am I going to have?
- How will I become part of the community?
- Will I need additional school or training?
- What are the specific requirements to achieve my postsecondary goals?

Where am I now relative to my vision of my life after I leave school?

- How are my current academic skills?
- How are my functional (including vocational) skills?
- Do I have and use the accommodations I need?
- Have the accommodations from my previous IEP been helpful?
- How can I make my vision of postsecondary life clearer?

How will I achieve my postsecondary vision?

- What do I need to learn to reach my vision?
- What course(s) of study should I take in school that will move me closer to my vision? Where can I learn about this?
- What credits do I need?
- Will I need a diploma to achieve my vision?
- What skills do I need to reach my vision, according to the assessment I've taken?
- Are my course(s) of study (school classes/programs listed in my EDP) aligned with my vision of my postsecondary life?
- What other (i.e. transition) services will help me reach my vision? Am I connected with people/agencies who can help me reach my vision?
- Has the point I will be ready to leave school been identified?

What will I learn this year that will move me toward my vision?

- Is my EDP up to date and reflective of what I need this year?
- What are my annual goals/objectives, and will they help me reach my vision?



Never before has there existed a more timely opportunity, within a strategic framework, to align systemic performance measures with a student's IEP agenda. By moving the whole process out of the mystical check-a-box mode, and towards a student-centered approach that focuses on a well-constructed picture of their future, is system-wide improvement attainable?

The simple asking of these tough questions provides some further guidance for developing a strategic IEP planning process. This proposal for the development of a widely-utilized agenda will always be a work-in-progress.

Are We Ready Yet?

It's a pretty simple question for the IEP team: "What are we getting this student ready for, and how will we know they're ready?" These can only be answered and accomplished by aligning the student's educational provisions and other supports with the stated direction within their transition-focused IEP.

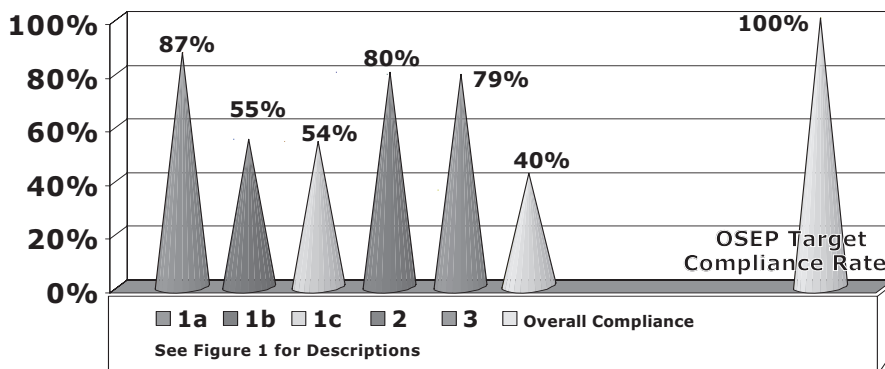
The collective goal should be to implement a strategic focus for each student's IEP planning. Perhaps this means taking a long, thoughtful look at the design of current IEP processes, forms, and agendas across the state of Michigan so that the next time parents and educators come together, the meeting can begin with a focus on the student's vision:

The assistant principal was offering me his prediction for Friday's game while the rest of the individualized education program (IEP) team took their seats. Coffee was poured. The IEP sign-in sheet made the rounds.

"Well everyone..." started my son, the student running the meeting, "I still want to live near my parents, and work at a TV station, so let's look at what I need to work on this year to make my goals happen...then we can look at..."

Figure 2: Secondary Transition Requirements

SPP Indicator 13: Secondary Transition
Overall Statewide Compliance
 VS.
OSEP Compliance Target
 2006



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RESOURCES

Michigan Transition Resources

www.cenmi.org/tspmi

Michigan Transition Resources Quick Reference Guide Tips for Developing a Quality and Compliant IEP

www.cenmi.org/tspmi/downloads/TOP-April07/TransitionTips.doc

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html

Michigan Transition Services Association

www.michigantsa.com

National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC)

www.nsttac.org

Michigan Education Web Sites

Michigan Department of Education

www.michigan.gov/mde

Michigan Department of Education (MDE)

Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (OSE/EIS)

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CHANGE TO FOCUS ON RESULTS INDEX

FOCUS on Results documents will now be labeled as followed:

- **Volume number** (indicates year of production; e.g. volume 6 indicates the sixth year of production).
- **Issue number** (indicates number produced within each year; e.g. volume 6, issue 2 indicates the second issue produced within the sixth year).
- **Packet number** (indicates overall number of packets produced).

Documents produced within a packet will contain the same volume/issue numbers. GATA numbers will no longer be used. FOCUS on Results documents will continue to be categorized by topic area, and numbering to previous issues will not change.