

Operationalizing Student Voice in the IEP

As part of the 2022 revisions to the NextStepsNH website Transition IEP Tool, we added a Student Voice section for each Indicator 13 requirement. This document consolidates all the separate pieces and provides a concrete flow for bringing your students' voices into their IEPs.

Postsecondary Goals

Measurable postsecondary goals drive a transition-focused IEP. When students and IEP team members plan together and create transition elements of the IEP together, the plan can help launch the student into post-school life.

Evidence shows student-led, transition-focused IEP meetings help students build self-determination skills by teaching them how to set goals, work to achieve goals, revise goals as needed, and persevere.

Step one is creating postsecondary goals that are based on the student's responses to transition assessments.

Transition Assessments

The student's responses to transition assessment questions will reveal their depth of understanding about life after high school. What they do or do not understand should heavily influence which transition assessments you use next and help determine if additional ones are necessary.

Transition Services

The questions below will help the team keep student voice central when developing transition services. A transition service that addresses a gap in student understanding may give the student new information about a chosen field, and result in them changing their mind about their postsecondary goals. For this reason, teams should try to consider these questions earlier than the compliance requirement to be in the IEP in place at age 16.

1. What experiences must the student participate in during this IEP year to support attaining their postsecondary goals?
2. What services and specific instruction are essential during this IEP year for the student to develop skills and knowledge to attain their postsecondary goals?
3. Do we know enough about this student's skills that we can identify or design activities to support their postsecondary goals, or is there a need for further investigation?

If a transition service helps a student discover that a postsecondary goal does not fit their interests or preferences after all, THAT IS A GOOD THING! They should be given help to revise the goal and the plan can be adjusted accordingly. If helpful adults get frustrated at the need to

change the plan, the student could perceive that learning about themselves, and as a result, changing their goal, is a bad thing. This message is counter to the intent of transition planning. Reviewing and revising goals and plans because new information has been discovered are important adult skills.

It is important for helpful adults to know if students do not know the nature of their disability, or if they do not understand the impact of accommodations and modifications on their learning. For students with this gap, the IEP team needs to discuss how the lack of understanding could impact the student's future education and employment and identify steps for the student to close the gap.

Course of Study

The Course of Study is the student's academic plan for high school. This plan should look identical to the plan the student makes with their high school counseling/guidance departments and family. When they all align, it reminds the student of the connection between their goals for life after high school and the courses they are taking.

It is motivating for students to see that the courses they will take connect to their interests and preferences for post-school goals. Their self-confidence increases when they see that their voice matters.

On the flip side, students whose voices are NOT heard may see their course plan as evidence that caring adults in their life believe they are less capable than peers who get to pursue their interests. They may believe they are less capable of taking a lead role in their transition to life after high school.

Coordination within the IEP team is important. It is easy for a student to become frustrated by adult expectations and requirements at this stage. When adult expectations and requirements are not aligned with each other (i.e., guidance, special ed, and parents are not on the same page), the student may disconnect from the process.

Annual Goals

Transition assessments should identify skills or knowledge students will need in future academic, employment or independent living settings. Students who need to learn to use their voice and be good advocates for themselves can do this through Annual Goals.

Annual goals might help a student address a need related to:

- setting and achieving goals
- understanding pros and cons of a particular path
- increasing self-awareness
- becoming actively involved in their IEP meetings
- leading their IEP meetings

- describing their strengths and challenges

Teams can help a student see the relevance of annual goals. For instance, related service providers (e.g., speech, OT, PT, counseling) could focus their activities on transition needs, such as practicing interview scripts, to help address an annual IEP goal.

Student Invitation

Indicator 13 requires that students be invited, NOT that they attend. While a team can incorporate the student's voice in planning and decision-making related to postsecondary plans without their attendance, a student benefits greatly when they attend and have been prepared to have an active role. In addition, they begin to practice the adult skills of being a part of a meeting as well as developing self-determination skills.

Helpful adults should proactively involve students in their IEP meetings as early as possible. Students can be coached to attend their meetings, at whatever level their preferences and abilities permit, and to practice skills that eventually enable them to run all or part of the meetings. Once a student becomes comfortable with attending, add responsibilities like assisting with introductions, reading, or showing their postsecondary goal statements, or facilitating sharing by team members providing progress updates and present levels of academic and functional performance.

Invitation to Participating Agency

Including an outside agency means giving people the student may not know access to their personal and confidential information. Student voice in involving outside agencies means allowing the student to be a part of the decision. When a school develops compliant processes for how they invite agencies into teams, this respects the student and family's voices and choices in the planning process and contributes to the student's understanding that they have authority over their future decisions.

11/4/22