Beyond Compliance: A Data-Driven Cycle for High-Quality Transition Plans

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> Research consistently demonstrates that students with disabilities (SWDs) who receive comprehensive, well-designed transition planning are significantly more likely to achieve positive post-secondary outcomes, including higher rates of employment, independent living, and community participation.

ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities (SWDs) often face lower employment, reduced income, and more limited independent living skills than peers without disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires individualized transition plans (ITPs) within students' individualized education programs (IEPs) to guide post-secondary goals, yet compliance alone rarely yields high-quality plans. This conceptual article presents a framework for designing robust, evidence-based ITPs that integrate academic, vocational, and independent living goals in a student-centered manner. It reviews essential ITP components, including age-appropriate transition assessments, present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), post-secondary outcomes, course of study, transition services, and SMART annual goals. Further, it emphasizes student and family voice and supplies concrete examples and figures. Practitioners can apply the framework to strengthen alignment among data, goals, and services, thereby improving transition planning and post-school outcomes for SWDs.

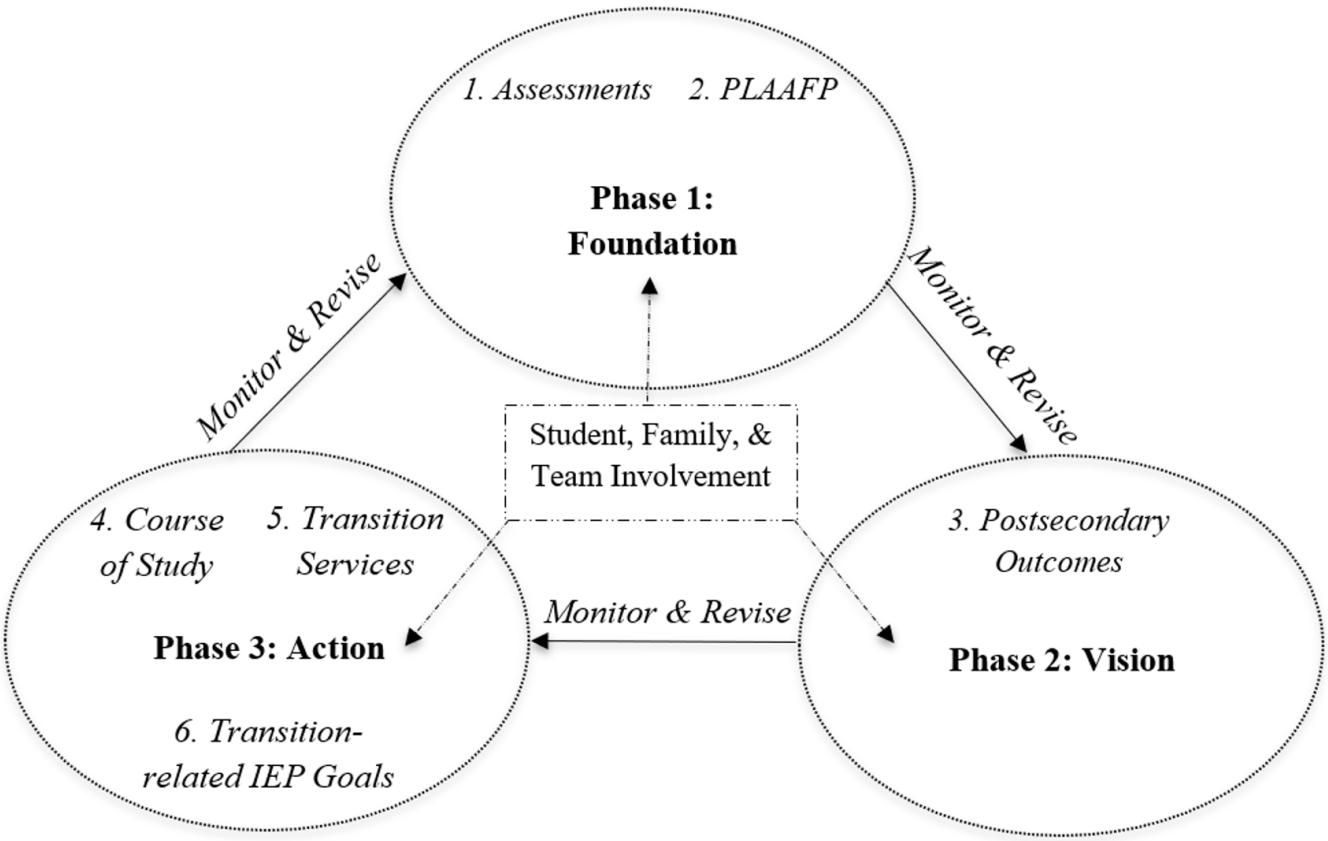
KEYWORDS

Data-driven planning; Indicator 13; individualized transition plans; teacher preparation; transition planning

Midway through the first quarter of the school year, Mrs. Somers, a high school special educator, was assigned a new student, Alex, who has mild cognitive impairment and is turning 16 during the academic year. Upon reviewing Alex's existing individual education program (IEP), she noticed that an individualized transition plan (ITP) had not yet been developed. Recognizing that formal transition services are legally required and essential to Alex's success, Mrs. Somers contacted the rest of the special education team to initiate the planning process. She knows research consistently demonstrates that students with disabilities (SWDs) who receive comprehensive, well-designed transition planning are significantly more likely to achieve positive post-secondary outcomes, including higher rates of employment, independent living, and community participation. Without a structured ITP in place, Alex faces increased risk of poor post-school outcomes—a critical concern given that national data show only 65% of SWDs graduate with a regular diploma and fewer than 20% attend 4-year colleges. A thoughtfully developed transition plan serves as a roadmap that aligns Alex's strengths, interests, and goals with appropriate services, accommodations, and community resources, ultimately bridging the gap between high school and adult life while maximizing opportunities for self-determination and independence.

This scenario underscores the significance of well-designed transition plans for high school SWDs. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004), all students with IEPs must have transition plans beginning no later than age 16 (or earlier in some states). These plans enable exploration of post-secondary options, facilitate skill development, and ensure specialized support is in place before students exit the school system (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

FIGURE 1: Integrated, Student Centered Framework for Developing High Quality ITPs



However, compliance alone does not guarantee that plans are truly individualized, data-driven, and meaningful. Many IEP teams struggle to incorporate the elements of best practice, such as rich collaboration, authentic student and family involvement, and a long-range vision, resulting in documents that fulfill the law's minimum requirements but fall short of promoting meaningful post-school outcomes. This persistent need to prepare teacher candidates to write high-quality ITPs motivates the framework presented in this article.

This article reconceptualizes IDEA's Indicator 13 as an integrated, student-centered system rather than a checklist. By mapping the six mandated components onto a cyclical framework driven by age-appropriate assessment data and sustained family–student engagement, we (a) generate a visual model practitioners can operationalize, (b) translate best evidence transition practices into a coherent decision sequence, and (c) advance testable propositions about how high-quality ITPs improve competitive integrated employment and independent living outcomes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR HIGH-QUALITY TRANSITION PLANS

Key Components

Indicator 13 of the IDEA is a compliance measure that evaluates the percentage of youth with IEPs aged 16 and above who have appropriate measurable post-secondary goals and transition services documented in their IEPs (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This indicator serves as the primary accountability mechanism through which states report annually on their performance in transition planning for SWDs. Indicator 13 requires that transition plans include six critical components: age-appropriate transition assessments, the present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), post-secondary outcomes, course of study (CoS), transition services, and annual transition-related IEP goals (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative [NTACT:C], 2024). While these components are often treated as discrete compliance items, they are interdependent elements of a dynamic planning process. In real-world implementation, the quality and impact of an ITP depend less on whether these elements are present and more on how systematically and meaningfully they are connected.

The importance of Indicator 13 extends beyond mere regulatory compliance; it represents a shift toward outcome-oriented planning that bridges the gap between secondary education and adult life for SWDs (NTACT:C, 2024). However, practitioners often face a tension between compliance and quality

in transition planning. While Indicator 13 establishes minimum standards that ensure legal requirements are met, simply checking boxes on a compliance form does not guarantee that transition plans are meaningful, individualized, or aligned with students' authentic interests and aspirations (NTACT:C, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Understanding Indicator 13's requirements and purpose is essential for practitioners to move beyond surface-level compliance toward creating high-quality, student-centered transition plans that yield positive post-secondary outcomes (NTACT:C, 2024).

Figure 1 presents an integrated, student-centered decision cycle that reconceptualizes these six elements as part of a cohesive framework. Moving clockwise, the cycle begins with age-appropriate transition assessments, which serve as the foundation for constructing a data-rich PLAAFP statement. This PLAAFP then anchors the development of meaningful post-secondary outcomes by articulating the student's aspirations in the areas of employment, further education or training, independent living, and transition-related IEP goals. These outcomes, in turn, inform the CoS, aligning the student's classes and educational experiences with long-term goals. The CoS helps determine the transition services that must be provided to bridge the gap between current performance and future targets. These services drive the development of annual IEP goals, which break down the larger post-school vision into measurable, attainable objectives within a one-year timeframe.

The solid arrows indicate a feedback loop for ongoing monitoring and revision, emphasizing that high-quality transition planning is not static. Teams must revisit and adjust the ITP as students' interests evolve, new data becomes available, and real-world experiences reveal new needs or strengths. In the middle of the framework are the student, family, and team (e.g., special education teacher, VR Counselors, Pre-ETS providers, SLP) involvement, with arrows connecting each phase of the cycle, signifying that meaningful participation is not an add-on but an embedded feature of each decision point in the cycle. Students and families, as part of the team, bring essential insights into the preferences, cultural values, perceptions of disability, support systems, and social contexts that shape every component—from assessments to post-secondary planning (Stansberry Brusnahan et al., 2023).

This framework prompts a critical shift from compliance-driven checklists to iterative, student-authored planning. Operationally, teams start with strengths and interests, test assumptions in real settings, study results, and then iterate. Rather than treating Indicator 13 elements as isolated boxes to complete, the cyclical arrows make explicit Plan–Do–Study–Act loops across assessment, PLAAFP, goals, services, and coursework, with each decision revisited as new assessment data, work-based learning, and family input refine the student's post-secondary trajectory. Centering the student and family reframes practitioners from form fillers to facilitators of self-determination and community-connected opportunities, co-constructing culturally responsive plans with agency partners engaged when services will bridge school and adult life, thereby transforming Indicator 13 requirements into a pathway for outcomes that matter (NTACT:C, 2024; Test et al., 2009).

A high-quality ITP, as conceptualized here, is not simply compliant; it is individualized, aligned, and outcome driven. Each component is tailored to reflect the student's current and emerging strengths, preferences, and needs. Moreover, this planning process requires collaboration across multiple stakeholders, including families, educators, related service providers, and community agencies. Such collaboration ensures that the plan is not only theoretically sound but practically executable, supported by real-world opportunities and services, culturally and linguistically sustainable, and reflective of the student's unique intersecting social identities (Stansberry Brusnahan et al., 2023). Continuous monitoring and revision ensure that the ITP remains relevant and effective, adapting to the student's development throughout high school and preparing them for the transition to adult life (Szidon et al., 2015).

Below, each element of the conceptual framework is examined in detail, using a running example from Alex's case to illustrate how the interconnected components function in practice. In this scenario, Alex's transition team applies the student-centered framework, outlined in Figure 1, beginning with data from appropriate age assessments and systematically aligning each subsequent component of the ITP. Tables and figures throughout the article illustrate how the team operationalizes the framework, integrates evidence-based strategies, and maintains a collaborative, student- and family-driven approach to planning and revision.

Age-Appropriate Transition Assessments

SWDs are not a monolithic group; they possess diverse strengths, learning profiles, cultural backgrounds, interests, and support needs that cannot be captured by a single assessment instrument or method. Age-appropriate transition assessments must therefore employ multiple tools and approaches—formal inventories, informal observations, interviews, work samples, and community-based situational assessments—to build a comprehensive, ecologically valid picture of the student across the domains of employment, education or training, and independent living (Neubert & Leconte, 2013; Rowe et al., 2015). Using various assessments serves three critical purposes: (1) it triangulates

TABLE 1: Alex's Transition Assessments

TRANSITION ASSESSMENTS	ASSESSMENT TYPE	RESPONSIBLE AGENCY/PERSON
EMPLOYMENT	O*Net Transition Planning Inventory-3 (TPI-3) Family-focused Interview	Alex Special Education Teacher, Father, Alex Special Education Teacher, Father
EDUCATION	TPI-3 SAT Class Summative Assessments	Special Education Teacher, Father, Alex Alex Special Education Teacher
TRAINING	TPI-3 Family-focused Interview	Special Education Teacher, Father, Alex Special Education Teacher, Father
INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS	Independent Functioning Evaluation Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales TPI-3 Family-focused Interview	Special Education Teacher Special Education Teacher Special Education Teacher, Father, Alex Special Education Teacher, Father

data to increase reliability and reduce bias inherent in any single measure; (2) it honors different ways students demonstrate competence, particularly for those with communication differences, sensory disabilities, or limited test-taking experience; and (3) it gathers contextual information—family expectations, community resources, cultural values around work and independence—that standardized tools alone cannot reveal (Trainor, 2017). Without this differentiated assessment approach, teams risk basing high-stakes post-secondary goals on incomplete or culturally incongruent data, undermining the individualization that IDEA and Indicator 13 require (NTACT:C, 2024).

In addition to utilizing assessments and resources already available through the district, teams may also refer to the NTACT:C (2024) Age-Appropriate Transition Assessment Toolkit. These guides are valuable tools, as they help link student needs to appropriate assessments and suggest additional resources, often available at little or no cost.

For Alex, the team selected tools that expanded on existing data from prior records. Alex's transition assessment plan reflects a strategic, multi-method approach designed to capture his strengths, preferences, and support needs across employment, education, and independent living domains (see Table 1).

*The team began with the O*NET Interest Profiler (https://www.onetonline.org/), administered by the special education teacher in collaboration with Alex, to help him explore potential career paths through detailed information on job duties, required skills and knowledge, work context, and related interests; this tool was selected because it provides a student-friendly, research-based framework for translating Alex's emerging interests into concrete occupational options aligned with labor market data. To complement this career exploration, the social worker administered the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales to evaluate Alex's social skills, including communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal relationships, and identify areas where he may need targeted support in interacting with peers and adults, a critical predictor of post-secondary success.*

Recognizing that high-quality transition planning requires input from multiple perspectives, the team administered the Transition Planning Inventory-3 (TPI-3), a survey completed by Alex, his father, and the special education teacher to gather convergent and divergent information about Alex's preferences, goals, and concerns regarding his transition to adulthood; this triangulation ensures that the plan reflects not only professional observations but also Alex's self-perception and his family's cultural values and expectations (Trainor, 2017). Finally, the special education teacher conducted a family-focused interview with Alex and his father to explore their shared vision for his future, including hopes, fears, and the role of extended family and community supports; this qualitative method was chosen to honor the family's voice and ensure that formal assessment data is interpreted within the context of Alex's lived experience and cultural identity (Stansberry Brusnahan et al., 2023). Together, these assessments provide the ecologically valid, comprehensive foundation required by Indicator 13 to develop meaningful, individualized post-secondary goals.

To plan for future assessment needs, the team mapped out additional instru-

TABLE 2: Alex's Subsequent Transition Assessments

ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Post-Secondary Education Readiness Assessment (e.g., Accuplacer, SAT, College Board's BigFuture)	If Alex is considering further education, this assessment evaluates his academic skills and readiness for college or vocational training.
Vocational Readiness Assessment (e.g., Functional Vocational Evaluation, Work Samples Assessment, Job Skills Assessment)	This will provide the team with insight into Alex's work readiness skills.
Independent Living Assessment (e.g., Independent Living Skills Assessment, Daily Living Skills Assessment, Activities of Daily Living Assessment, Functional Independence Measure)	This will inform the team of Alex's specific independent living skills.
Community Participation Assessment (e.g., Community Engagement Evaluation, Community Integration Assessment)	This will inform the team of Alex's specific community participation skills.

ments they might use as Alex's interests evolve. Table 2 illustrates potential future assessments, ensuring that the ITP remains dynamic and adaptable over the course of high school.

For documentation, Alex's team recorded all assessments administered in the "Age-Appropriate Transition Assessments" section of the ITP. Table 2 depicts how a district form might list each assessment, along with dates, results, and how the information informed Alex's plan. *With the assessments completed, Alex's team begins to synthesize and make meaning of his data. In doing so, they complete his PLAAFP.*

PLAAFP

Under IDEA, the PLAAFP must describe the student's current academic achievement and functional performance and explain how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. This baseline anchors measurable annual goals and services, so readers can view the enhancements that follow as strategies for strengthening legal compliance and instructional usefulness. In doing so, a thorough PLAAFP grounds the ITP in a current, holistic understanding of student performance (Hedin & DeSpain, 2018; NTACT:C, 2024; see Figure 2).

*Across domains, Alex's PLAAFP is anchored in a multi-method assessment battery that triangulates career interests, adaptive functioning, transition priorities, and family vision. O*NET exploration with Alex and his special education teacher translated his interests into concrete occupational duties and skill demands, clarifying the types of work contexts that align with his preferences for predictable, hands-on tasks. The TPI-3, completed by Alex, his father, and the teacher, converged on strengths in punctuality, task persistence, and following routines, while identifying priorities for communication with peers, generalizing skills to new settings, and planning for education/training after high school. The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, administered by the social worker, highlighted growth areas in communication and socialization alongside emerging daily living skills that are strongest when supported by visual structure. A family-focused interview surfaced the family's vision for stable, local employment and stepwise exposure to new environments, reinforcing the need for culturally responsive supports, visual scaffolds, and mentored community practice. As a brief verification step, Alex's father reviewed draft PLAAFP statements to confirm accuracy and cultural fit, functioning as a participant check before finalization.*

*In Employment, O*NET and TPI-3 point to realistic/conventional roles with consistent routines, informing a PLAAFP focus on building job-specific communication, problem-solving when routines shift, and exposure to authentic work settings that mirror preferred conditions. In Education/Training, TPI-3 priorities and the family interview support a PLAAFP that targets readiness for certificate-bearing programs with explicit study and self-advocacy strategies aligned to Alex's visual strengths.*

In Independent Living, Vineland results and TPI-3 priorities justify a PLAAFP that builds functional money management, transportation planning, and flexible problem-solving, with visual schedules and task analyses to promote independence. In Social/Communication, Vineland findings and TPI-3 indicators of support needs in peer interaction drive a PLAAFP that calls for explicit instruction and rehearsal in initiating/maintaining conversations, help-seeking, and conflict resolution, practiced in low-demand contexts and generalized to work and community settings. Collectively, the assessments-to-PLAAFP connections ensure the plan is individualized, culturally responsive, and directly actionable for goal setting and services aligned with Indicator 13.

Organizing the PLAAFP. To enhance clarity, each functional domain (e.g., academics, vocation, self-determination, independent living, social skills)

FIGURE 2: Vocation Excerpt from Alex's PLAAFP

Student's Present Levels of Functional/Developmental Performance (Include strengths and areas that need improvement)

Vocation: Alex, a sophomore, demonstrates moderate vocational skills as assessed by the TPI-3, O*Net, and parent interview. According to the TPI-3, Alex can name occupations he prefers and has an attitude expected by employers to keep a job. He is also beginning to develop general hob skills expected by employers to keep a job. He has good speaking and listening skills and displays appropriate social behavior in everyday social settings. Alex also gets along well with family members, friends, and others outside of the family and adapts well to new social situations.

During the interview with Alex's father, these strengths were reinforced. Father notes that Alex is very easy-going and enjoys working and a job well-done. He further expressed that Alex does well in social situations and is thoughtful with his speaking and listening skills. Although Alex has only done small jobs around the school and home settings, Alex's father indicates that he picks up quickly with the right types of support (e.g., task lists, video modeling/job coach at onset) and is always eager to work. Alex and his father both believe that full-time employment in the community, with a job coach and training at the onset, is a viable option. Alex's community has a music shop where he spends time taking lessons, shopping, and socializing. Alex has expressed interest in working at this music store after high school.

The results of the O*Net assessment further support this as a career option. Due to his strengths in social skills and problem-solving, Alex appears to also have interest and aptitude in pursuing a career in hospitality and tourism.

Although there are areas of interest, Alex needs to further develop his understanding of roles and responsibilities for various career options. Based on the results of the TPI-3, Alex struggles to know specific job requirements and demands of his preferred occupations and how to get a job. Although he is beginning to develop general job skills, this is an area he needs to continue to develop, along with learning specific knowledge and skills needed for entry-level positions that he has interest in. Additionally, Alex will need to continue to develop his writing and reading skills to further support his acquisition into the workforce. Finally, Alex and his father indicate that it is important for Alex to develop skills related to self-advocacy and protecting himself from being exploited in the workplace. Because Alex is overly willing and eager to help, he is sometimes exploited by others. In the next year, the team would like Alex to work on further exploring his career interests and the roles and responsibilities associated with each. Further, it is important for him to continue developing his self-determination skills and knowledge of when he is being exploited.

may be addressed under a separate heading. Figure 2 shows an excerpt from Alex's PLAAFP focused on vocational strengths and areas for development. Because Alex's social skills are strong, the team noted how this interpersonal strength could benefit him in a work environment. They also identified key skill gaps, such as self-advocacy and protection from exploitation in the workplace.

A robust PLAAFP bridges student strengths to targeted outcomes. It should connect directly to transition assessments, reflect real-world performance, and clearly identify skill priorities for the upcoming IEP year. Based on the PLAAFP, the team then identifies post-secondary outcomes.

Post-Secondary Outcomes

Post-secondary outcomes reflect students' long-term aspirations in three broad domains: employment, further education and/or training, and independent living (IDEA, 2004). High-quality post-secondary outcomes should be grounded in assessment data, emphasize high expectations, and be realistic given community resources (Clavenna-Deane & Coates, 2022). Teams should collaboratively identify and prioritize post-school outcomes by centering students' preferences and integrating them with assessment data. Through a collaborative process, ITP team members, including students, families, educators,

TABLE 3: Alex's Post-Secondary Outcomes

OUTCOME DOMAIN	STUDENT OUTCOME
Employment Outcomes/Goals [AND]	After high school, Alex will work full-time in the community's local music store.
Postsecondary Education Outcomes/Goals [AND/OR]	N/A
Postsecondary Training Outcomes/Goals [AND]	After high school, Alex will participate in on-the-job training at his place of employment and work with a job coach to help him develop skills and maintain his job.
Independent Living Outcomes/Goals [AND]	After high school, Alex will participate in his community theater and continue to take music lessons at his place of employment.

Note. Equipped with the PLAAFP and post-secondary outcomes, Alex's team then shifts focus to developing the multi-year Course of Study (CoS).

and related service providers, can articulate ambitious yet attainable post-secondary outcomes. This approach allows teams to balance high expectations with realistic pathways and align supports and services with available community resources. By prioritizing outcomes in partnership with students, teams can develop ITPs that are both data-driven and student-centered, increasing the likelihood of meaningful post-secondary success.

Employment Outcomes. Employment outcomes include independent or competitive integrated employment, where individuals with disabilities earn comparable wages, receive benefits, interact with non-disabled peers, and have equal advancement opportunities (Wehman et al., 2018; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Post-secondary employment can also include supported employment, customized employment, or self-employment models (Zager, 2022). Teams should develop plans for future employment based on strengths-based assessment data and each student's unique priorities.

Educational/Training Outcomes. Educational outcomes vary based on student strengths and preferences, such as attending trade schools, on-the-job training, or 2- and 4-year colleges. Although IDEA services end after high school, protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the Higher Education Act ensure access to support in post-secondary settings. Many colleges now offer comprehensive transition and post-secondary programs, available in 49 states (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), with resources like ThinkCollege.net for details on financial aid and housing.

Discussions about which post-secondary education and/or training options to prioritize should center on students' long-term goals and interests and be supported by assessment data. Teams should also consider adaptive skills, self-advocacy, and the ability to access disability support services in higher education. If a college education aligns with the student's long-term goals, the team can explore a range of college options, including community colleges and 4-year universities, while planning for supports like testing accommodations, tutoring, and assistive technology. If college is not the best fit, teams can prioritize alternative pathways, such as vocational training, apprenticeships, or supported employment, while keeping the door open for future educational opportunities as the student gains skills and confidence. Transition teams should also provide students with information on their educational rights in higher education settings, financial aid options, and disability supports (Rowe et al., 2018).

Independent Living Outcomes. Independent living outcomes capture housing, self-care, recreation, and community participation (Clavenna-Deane & Coates, 2022; Mann & Wang, 2021). Transition teams consider all relevant aspects of independent living (Pearson et al., 2020), focusing on those most pertinent for the student. Meaning, those that best align with their priorities and are supported by assessment data. It is important for teams to remember that "independence" looks different for everyone. While current special education policies and practices emphasize individualism and independence, those ideals might not be shared by all families and students (Stansberry Brusnahan et al., 2023). Key questions for planning for future independence can include:

Does the student want to pursue a driver's license, use specialized transportation, or rely on public transit?

How thoroughly and accurately are they able to express their personal, medical, and academic details, and advocate for their legal rights and responsibilities?

What are the norms and desires related to living in a separate residence ex-

TABLE 4: Alex's Four-Year Course of Study Aligned to Postsecondary Goals

YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	EXTENDED
English 9*	English 10*	English 11*	English 12*	
Algebra*	Geometry*	Algebra 2*	Personal Finance/ **Fine Arts***	
Biology*	Chemistry*	Study Hall	Physical Education	
Human Geography*	US Government*/ Study Hall	US History	**Community-based Employment**	
Health/ Physical Education	Physical Education	Physical Education	**Community-based Employment**	
Concert Band 1	**Concert Band 2**	**Jazz Band 1**	**Community-based Employment**	
Theater Arts 1	**Theater Arts 2: Acting & Production**	**Career Planning**	**Community-based Employment**	

Note. Courses in bold were selected to align with Alex's employment goal of working in a music-related setting. Courses with an asterisk reflect requirements for a diploma.

pressed by the student and their families?

What leisure and community activities do they enjoy, what new age-appropriate activities do they have an interest in exploring upon reaching adulthood, and how can access to these be maintained after graduation?

These questions, and others like them, help students and their teams define post-secondary independent living goals that are personalized and attainable. By addressing these areas in transition planning, teams create a strategic, multi-year approach, focusing on transition services, agency connections, and the student's CoS (Covington & Rowlett, 2021; Kraemer et al., 2022).

Alex, a highly social individual with a keen interest in music, identified community theater involvement and continued music lessons as part of his post-school plan. Alex and the team decided against post-secondary academic education, favoring direct workforce entry with on-site training (see Table 3). Specific accommodations and supports, such as a Department of Rehabilitative Services job coach, were arranged to ensure success. Alex's interest in music led the team, with the help of his father, to identify a local music store where they had an existing social connection. By contacting the store manager, they determined that on-the-job training with job coach support was both feasible and aligned with Alex's aspirations. Table 3 shows how the team succinctly documented these outcomes in the ITP form, ensuring alignment with the PLAAFP data and Alex's evolving interests.

CoS

A student's multi-year CoS should align with the PLAAFP and post-secondary goals, bridging the gap between present performance and future aspirations. For those pursuing college, CoS typically includes college-preparatory courses. For others, it may emphasize vocational and life-skills classes. Regardless of the path, CoS planning should begin early to ensure that students meet graduation requirements while still developing essential transition-related competencies.

This multi-year plan begins no later than the first year of transition planning and continues until students exit school, either by earning a diploma or reaching the maximum age. The CoS includes required graduation courses and electives that support independent living, community engagement, and vocational success (Kraemer et al., 2022), as well as other courses necessary to meet the unique special education needs of the learner. The CoS, alongside other tools, helps teams develop personalized ITPs based on each student's post-secondary goals, with input from professionals like guidance counselors, teachers, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and college disability services (Kraemer et al., 2022).

In collaboration with a guidance counselor, Alex's team mapped out the remaining high school years. They balanced rigorous academic coursework to fulfill diploma requirements, to ensure that Alex's schedule met state diploma requirements, with electives (e.g., Jazz Band, Theater Arts) and community-based opportunities that supported his post-secondary transition goals. Table 4 illustrates how these plans were organized year by year, and how the team worked to find a balance between diploma requirements and post-school goals. *Because Alex's PLAAFP identified*

TABLE 5: Sample of Selected Transition Services and Activities

SERVICES (SKILLS)	ACTIVITIES
Build vocabulary skills	Visit a college or job fair
Improve expository writing conventions	Try out Assistive Technology to aid notetaking and document preferences
Learn to use public transportation	Complete a career portfolio
Initiate peer interactions	Job shadow 4 hours/week for 9 weeks
Improve skills associated with budgeting, time management, algebraic equations	Meet with guidance counselor to review graduation plan
Follow multi-step directions	Group or individual meetings with OVR counselor
Practice self-advocacy skills	Register to vote

strong interpersonal skills and an interest in music, the team selected electives such as Jazz Band and Theater Arts to support those strengths and areas of interest. These choices also build toward his employment goal of working in a community music store.

The example provided in Table 4 is only meant to serve as one possible example, since there is no one-size-fits-all CoS. Just as the priorities, goals, interests, and areas of strength are unique for each student, so too will each CoS contain a unique plan that reflects them. What's more, a CoS for students on alternate diplomas or certificate tracks will look quite different, and those too should be similarly aligned to students' unique post-secondary goals. Once the CoS is developed, the team then focuses on identifying the transition services the student should participate in to further bridge the gap between present performance and future aspirations.

Transition Services

Transition services include direct activities, programs, and supports intended to bridge students from high school to adulthood. Services may address instruction, related services, community experiences, daily living skill development, functional vocational evaluations, and agency linkages. Teams need not confine transition services to the regular school day; they can draw on supports offered in school, community, and home settings by leveraging partnerships with local employers, post-secondary institutions, and community agencies to create authentic learning opportunities aligned with student goals.

For example, a team might coordinate with a local community college to provide dual-enrollment coursework and campus orientation sessions during the school year, while simultaneously partnering with a regional employer to offer paid internships that allow the student to apply classroom skills in real work environments. Similarly, collaboration with vocational rehabilitation counselors can facilitate benefits planning workshops held at the school site, and partnerships with community recreation programs can embed social skills instruction within inclusive after-school activities that extend learning beyond traditional classroom hours. In this respect, the family and community members are vital to the transition process. Crucially, each service must align with the student's long-term vision (Test et al., 2009). Table 5 presents generic examples of possible services.

Multi-Year Planning. High-quality transition planning unfolds as a multi-year developmental sequence in which services and activities build systematically from foundational exploration to targeted skill acquisition and real-world application. In the early years (typically Ages 14–16), transition services emphasize career awareness, interest inventories, self-determination skill-building, and exposure to a broad range of post-secondary options through job shadows, guest speakers, and community field trips that help students begin to articulate preferences and strengths.

As students move into the middle years (Ages 16–18), services shift toward career preparation and decision-making: students engage in work-based learning experiences such as internships or paid employment, enroll in dual-credit or certificate-bearing coursework aligned with their post-secondary goals, and receive explicit instruction in self-advocacy, independent living skills, and navigation of adult service systems.

In the final years before exit (Ages 18–21/22), transition services prioritize career launch and connection to adult supports: students refine job-specific competencies through extended work

TABLE 6: Alex's Multi-year Plan of Transition Services – Employment Only

GRADE	ACTIVITIES
Postschool Outcome: After graduating from high school, Alex will work full time in the community's local music store.	
9th grade	Career assessments Exploration of careers in music via O*Net Vocational Interest Inventory with discussion of results Career-specific guest speakers Job exploration counseling * Instruction in self-determination (e.g., choice making, decision making, problem solving)
10th grade	Structured interview with a community music store employee and owner Career interests and roles and responsibilities with various roles Participate in music knowledge workshops – instrument basics (e.g., overview of instruments, their parts, how they work Workplace readiness training Instruction in self-determination (e.g., self-awareness, self-management)
11th grade	Job shadow at community music store Participate in workplace readiness training to develop social skills (i.e., communication, problem solving, decision making, conflict resolution) Instruction in self-determination (e.g., goal setting and attainment) Work related problem-solving exercises Participate in music knowledge workshops – audio equipment (e.g., learn about amplifiers, mixers, microphones)
12th grade	Internship at community music store Customer service training Instruction in self-determination (e.g., self-advocacy) Participate in music knowledge workshops – customer interaction and sales techniques (e.g., best practices for engaging with customers, role-playing sales and product recommendations) Resume and application completion Mock interviews

experiences, complete applications for post-secondary education or vocational rehabilitation services, establish benefits planning and healthcare transition plans, and rehearse the routines and problem-solving strategies required for independence in their chosen post-secondary setting.

Throughout this progression, teams monitor student progress through formative data, including work evaluations, course grades, self-assessment checklists, and feedback from community partners—and adjust services, goals, and supports in response to emerging strengths, barriers, and shifts in student interests or circumstances. This progression ensures that each year's services are developmentally appropriate, logically sequenced, and directly responsive to the student's evolving readiness, so that by the time of exit, the student has not only identified a destination but has systematically built the skills, connections, and confidence to succeed there. Table 6 highlights the specific activities chosen for Alex to support vocational readiness, self-determination, and community engagement. Although not included in the table, responsible parties should be noted to clarify who is responsible for ensuring the services and activities are completed (e.g., pre-ETS provider, family, outside agency, special education teacher).

Equipped with a plan that focuses on where Alex is currently functioning and where they want to end up, he and his team then turn their attention to creating the transition-related IEP goals and short-term objectives.

Transition-Related IEP Goals and Short-Term Objectives

Annual transition IEP goals should function as practical stepping-stones that move a student from the present to the future (Huber et al., 2022). For every transition area—employment, education or training, and independent living—the IEP team writes at least one goal that is grounded in three anchors: the needs described in the PLAAFP, the learning opportunities available in the current CoS, and the student's declared post-secondary outcomes (see Table 7). For example, Alex's team selected a goal centered on self-awareness based on his PLAAFP, which identified a pattern of over-compliance and vulnerability in workplace settings, posing a barrier to his post-secondary employment goal.

When these anchors align, the goal is both relevant and teachable during the regular school day. For instance, a laundry-skills goal makes sense only if doing laundry is an identified need, fits into the student's daily schedule, and supports a life-skills outcome such as

TABLE 7: Alignment between Alex's Employment PLAAFP, Postschool Outcomes, CoS

EMPLOYMENT PLAAFP		
... Alex and his father indicate that it is important for Alex to develop skills related to self-advocacy and protecting himself from being exploited in the workplace. Because Alex is overly willing and eager to help, he is sometimes exploited by others. In the next year, the team would like Alex to work on further exploring his career interests and the roles and responsibilities associated with each. Further, it is important for Alex to continue developing his self-determination skills and knowledge of when he is being exploited.		
Post-Secondary Outcome	**CoS**	**Target Skill**
After high school, Alex will work full-time in the community's local music store.	English 10, Theater Arts 2, Study Hall	Self-awareness

TABLE 8: CLBC Component Definitions

GOAL COMPONENT	WHAT IT ANSWERS	TYPICAL WORDING
Condition (Materials, Assistance, Directions)	Under what circumstances will the skill be performed?	"Given a workplace scenario that involves exploitation and verbal cues, …"
Learner	Who will perform the skill?	Alex
Behavior/skill	What observable action will occur?	will identify three strategies to avoid workplace exploitation
Criteria (Mastery, Retention)	How well—and for how long—must the learner perform the skill?	On ¾ scenarios per week for 3 consecutive weeks.

independent apartment living; otherwise, the team should choose a skill that can be practiced naturally in existing classes or routines. By tying every goal to what the student needs now, can realistically practice, and ultimately hopes to achieve, the IEP remains rigorous, feasible, and genuinely future-focused (Hedin & DeSpain, 2018).

Writing SMART Goals. With the "what" and "why" of transition goals firmly anchored—each goal must reflect PLAAFP data, fit within the CoS, and point toward the student's post-secondary vision—the next step is deciding how to craft those goals so they are unambiguous and actionable for everyone who will teach or support the student. This is where the SMART framework comes in. By making every goal specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, and time-limited, the team translates big-picture alignment into clear daily instruction and progress monitoring (Hedin & DeSpain, 2018).

The following illustrates how to build SMART goals—and their short-term objectives—using the Condition, Learner, Behavior, Criteria (CLBC) template so that each goal remains tightly linked to the anchors identified above while providing concrete criteria for success (see Table 8).

For Alex, the team prioritized self-awareness of potential workplace exploitation. They crafted an annual goal to help Alex recognize personal rights, boundaries, and possible solutions to exploitation scenarios. For his IEP Goal the team writes: Given a scenario involving an individual trying to exploit Alex in the workplace, he will demonstrate self-awareness by articulating his personal rights, boundaries, and appropriate responses to the exploitation in the scenario on 4 out of 5 scenarios per week for 3 consecutive weeks by [insert date that is one year from implementation of current ITP].

Corresponding short-term objectives are built toward mastery, introducing each skill set in smaller, measurable increments (e.g., articulating one employee right in a scenario before progressing to more complex tasks). *In further developing his IEP Goal, the team write Short Term Objective 1 to include: Given a scenario involving an individual trying exploit Alex in the workplace, he will demonstrate self-awareness by articulating and explaining at least one employee right and how this applies to the work situation on 4 out of 5 scenarios per week for 3 consecutive weeks by [insert date that is approximately 3 months from implementation of current ITP].* Subsequent short-term objectives would follow this same framework, furthering the student toward competency in the desired skill or behavior outlined in the goal.

Once the transition plan is finalized, Alex's team moves to implementation and continuous progress monitoring, regularly revisiting the framework's iter-

ative cycle (see Figure 1) and adjusting services as needed throughout the IEP year. In doing so, they ensure fidelity, responsiveness, and accountability throughout the IEP year.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The importance of meaningful student and family involvement throughout the entire transition planning process cannot be understated. In fact, student and family voice should be embedded in every stage of the ITP cycle. Family involvement[1] has been identified as a key predictor of post-school success (Test et al., 2009), and family engagement with the transition planning process and high familial expectations can substantially improve post-school outcomes (Hirano et al., 2018; Landmark et al., 2020). In fact, in addition to family involvement being a key predictor of post-school success on its own, Rowe et al. (2015) included aspects of student and family involvement in the operational definitions of three other quality indicators: quality transition programs, community experiences, and interagency collaboration. This includes all families, including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, foster families, extended families, and families of choice. Teams should consider language access, scheduling flexibility, and cultural responsiveness to ensure all families can meaningfully participate. This requires educators to be both knowledgeable about the families of their students and to possess the skills needed to effectively collaborate with them during the transition planning processes (Landmark et al., 2020).

Likewise, higher levels of student involvement, self-determination, and self-advocacy in transition planning consistently predict better academic, employment, and community-living outcomes (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Wilder, 2014) for SWDs. As SWDs approach adulthood, they gain greater autonomy, including transfer of educational rights at the age of majority (Yell et al., 2022). This includes all students, including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, who are involved in the juvenile justice system, and those with communication or complex support needs. This requires educators to prioritize student voice, even when it requires forethought and effort, and to be creative when planning for meaningful student participation. This might include utilizing person-centered planning and student-led IEP tools and adapting or scaffolding them as necessary. Participation does not have to be in-person, especially with the now almost ubiquitous availability of video tools like Zoom and Teams, so physical proximity need not be a barrier to meaningful student participation. Technology, like augmentative and alternative communication devices, digital visual schedules, and language translation software, can likewise support students with communication needs through various aspects of transition planning. As Miller et al. (2025) noted, the deliberate actions that educators and other members of the transition team take "to ensure that students with complex support needs are not only acknowledged but also actively included, represented, and respected" (p. 261) in educational processes are taking meaningful steps to address and rectify the myriad inequities many of these students face.

Alex and his family participated in each stage of the transition assessment process. His family was able to provide key insights into his personal interests, willingness to learn new tasks, their observed generalizability of skills he learned at school, and the family's preferred level of future support. The team fostered Alex and his family's continued involvement by consulting with them about desired career paths, listening to concerns around potential exploitation, and encouraging them to identify solutions that would work for their unique family situation. Without the input of his family throughout the planning process, school personnel would have been unaware of the existing connection they had to a local music store, which had a direct influence on the post-secondary outcomes identified and the CoS developed. The ITP team, including his family, also supported Alex in preparing to take an active role in his ITP meeting and document creation. Such meaningful participation helps ensure that the ITP reflects Alex's authentic goals rather than adult-driven assumptions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, TEACHER PREPARATION, AND RESEARCH

This framework recasts transition planning as a continuous, data-rich design cycle: assessments inform PLAAFP statements; PLAAFP drives goals, services, and monitoring; results feed the next round of decisions—all animated by student and family voice.

Policy and Practice

At the policy and practice levels, this framework provides a structure for states and districts to reimagine Indicator 13 monitoring systems. Rather than evaluating compliance through isolated checklist items, monitoring protocols could assess the *quality and coherence* of ITP components. Embedding these linkages into state guidance documents, rubrics, and professional learning communities could improve fidelity and equity of implementation across districts. Policymakers might also revise data-collection procedures to capture qualitative indicators of student and family engage-

1 The term used in Test et al. (2009) is "Parent Involvement", but the authors choose to use "family" in place of "parent" to reflect the various compositions of diverse families.

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ment, offering a more holistic measure of transition quality. Districts can embed the decision map in professional-learning modules, electronic IEP systems, and state monitoring rubrics. The built-in linkages let teams ask not, *"Is a plan present?"* but *"Is the plan tightly aligned and likely to change post-school trajectories?"*

Teacher Preparation

In methods and transition courses, instructors can use the tables and figures as guided templates for drafting PLAAFPs and SMART goals, score products with CEC-aligned rubrics, and push candidates to field-test the framework during practica. The resulting artifacts—assessment summaries, goal charts, implementation checklists—feed e-portfolios and give faculty rubric data for continuous program improvement.

Field-Test

The framework is embedded in a transition-planning course for pre-service special education teachers. After instructors break down each step in class, candidates apply it in two linked assignments: (1) a three-part case-study series and (2) a full transition-planning project with a practicum student. Candidates said the model "connected the dots" and offered "a roadmap, not scattered tips," while its flowchart prompted them to ask questions like, "Does the CoS give time to teach the goal I just wrote?" Cooperating teachers reported clearer data links and sharper, measurable goals, and the instructor saw far fewer errors such as goals lacking criteria. Moving from small cases to a holistic project helped candidates internalize a repeatable, data-driven process rather than a compliance checklist.

Future Research

By specifying how Indicator-13 components interact, the model yields testable claims that go beyond isolated practices. Five initial propositions (P1–P5) predict that tighter assessment-to-goal linkage, stronger PLAAFP alignment, greater student voice, explicit family expectations, and twice-per-semester progress checks will each improve goal quality, work-based learning participation, self-determination, employment rates, and fidelity of service delivery. Mixed-method studies pairing document analysis with longitudinal follow-up can evaluate these claims and refine the framework's fit across contexts. With this dual practice and research lens in mind, we invite scholars to pursue the following propositions as an initial empirical agenda:

- P1 Assessment linkage: Plans that tie each transition assessment to a PLAAFP datum will contain more SMART goals than compliance-only plans.
- P2 Alignment cascade: Stronger PLAAFP-to-goal-to-course alignment predicts a higher likelihood of students completing at least one work-based experience.
- P3 Student voice: When students lead ≥50% of meetings, their self-determination scores 1 year out exceed those of peers with lower participation.
- P4 Family expectations: Plans that list two or more family-generated expectations correlate with higher competitive-employment rates 2 years after graduation.
- P5 Iterative monitoring**:** Teams that review ITP progress at least twice per semester make more mid-course adjustments and deliver services that match the written plan more closely.

CONCLUSION

The transition from high school to adulthood can be particularly complex for SWDs, underscoring the importance of individualized, student-centered planning. By adhering to federal requirements while maintaining a strong focus on each student's strengths, interests, and post-school vision, educators can create high-quality

ITPs that facilitate positive outcomes in employment, post-secondary education or training, and independent living.

This article presented a conceptual framework and practical guidance to enrich compliance-driven planning with data-based, collaborative, and student-empowering strategies. The example of Alex's journey illustrates how to identify and administer targeted assessments; write a coherent, domain-specific PLAAFP; develop realistic post-school outcomes; design a CoS aligned with those outcomes; specify multi-year transition services; and write IEP goals that cultivate crucial skills over time. By centering on student voice and family involvement, and by maintaining a systematic approach to monitoring and revision, the ITP can become a powerful tool for ensuring that SWDs are well-prepared for their adult lives.

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