

A person in a blue suit stands on a road, holding up a large, dark, textured rock. The rock is positioned in the center of the frame, partially obscuring the title text. The road is a two-lane asphalt road with white dashed lines, stretching into the distance. The surrounding area is a lush green field. In the background, two more smaller rocks are visible on the road, one further ahead and one further back.

WHAT to Do When the Transitioning Efforts Don't Work

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Prior to 1975, very few people were even thinking about how students with autism could be brought into the work force because individuals with disabilities were not even allowed to be educated in the public schools in most states in the country before that time.

By June 2014, only 19.3% of people with disabilities in the U.S. were participating in the labor force—working or seeking work. Of those, 12.9% were unemployed, meaning only 16.8% of the population with disabilities was employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

The truth is that—now, after 19 years of the institution of the individual transitioning plan (ITP) being enacted as part of IDEA 1997 (with 2004 transition revisions)—only a small percentage of our youth on the autism spectrum are transitioning into jobs in their communities, even though the sole purpose of the ITP programs was and still is to get our students into the work force after high school.

What Can Be Done to Change This Situation?

- The ITP must be started early in the schools—at 14 years of age—but parents need to have a vision for their child from kindergarten and the early elementary school years. Temple Grandin's latest book, *The Loving Push*, not only explains how critical it is to begin at this age, but it also gives concrete suggestions on how to implement a job-oriented child at an early age. Everyone who is a member of that child's team, including the child, needs to be creating an idea of who he or she is and what capabilities are in the home, the community,

and the world. We do it for our neurotypical children. Why are we not doing it for our children with autism? Because we feel guilty? Because we ourselves are not certain that indeed there is a place for them in the community? In the job force? If this is the case, then we must work harder to get our youth with autism to have realistic choices for employment, options for social activities and outings in the community, and alternatives to the 'school-to-couch' living alternative.

- If an opportunity exists to bring back vocational programs into the public schools—even if your child isn't oriented toward vocational education—support the effort

cosmetology, nursing assistance/home health care, computer science, automobile mechanics, and restaurant/food services. If they don't exist in your community, consider other close-by communities because many junior colleges house specialty programs, depending upon their locations (e.g., some of the best schools in cuisine/restaurant/food services are in major metropolitan areas).

- Look at specialty schools like the Art Institute, design schools, retail training and management programs, information technology schools, bookkeeping programs, and electrical and plumbing schools because they provide high-end salary possibilities and

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because it will benefit jobs for thousands of individuals, whether or not they're on the autism spectrum. At as early a time as possible, while the child is still in high school, parents need to evaluate and consider vocational schools for their post-high school graduate, linking the child's interests and job skill sets to what is taught in vocational schools. Research before your child graduates, so he or she can go from one school into another.

- Many of the subjects that provide great jobs and incomes are taught in junior colleges, such as agriculture/plant management,

are vocations in great demand. Like vocational schools, check them out long before graduation!

- If your child is planning (realistically) to go to college, there is a need to understand that these institutions are limited in their support, according to privacy laws and federal regulations. In other words, parents rarely can continue as the advocate for their child; the child must become his or her own advocate. Also, while college and universities might state that they have programs conducive to and supporting those on the autism spectrum, it's important to know that college and universities are

governed by laws that are limited in support and the programs have to be evaluated well before your child attends the college campus.

Colleges and Universities Are Governed by Laws Limited in Support

Universities—to be federally compliant—must have a Disabilities Support Services Center with which the student registers when enrolling in the college. The Disabilities Support Services Center assesses the student so that, together, the college and the student decide what accommodations are needed for the student to succeed in the college setting. Does the student require a sign language interpreter? A note taker? Extended time for assignments? Extended due dates for tests? Extra time to get to classes? Proximity to the instructor? All the very same modifications that were available to the student in the public school setting are also supposedly available in the college setting.

Typically, by this time, the student has reached the “age of majority,” when a young person is considered to be an adult. Depending on state laws, this can happen between 18 and 21 years of age. At this juncture, the state may transfer to that child all (or some of) the educational rights that the parents have had up to the moment. Not all states transfer rights at the age of majority, but if your state does, then the rights and responsibilities that parents had under IDEA with respect to their child’s education will belong to *that child* (<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/age-of-majority/>).

This is a major difference in your child’s life because—typically in the case of those with children on the autism spectrum—the parents have been the child’s greatest advocate.

Suddenly, the child has to become his or her own advocate, which many young people on the spectrum are not used to being. A book recently published about the difficulties of this change is written by J.D. Kraus, *The Aspie College, Work, and Survival Guide*.

If the student hasn’t reached the age of majority, the state must establish procedures for appointing the parent of a child with a disability or, if the parent is not available, another appropriate individual to represent the educational interests of the child throughout the period of the child’s eligibility. If under state law, a child who has reached the age of majority and has not been determined to be incompetent can be determined not to have the ability to provide informed consent with respect to the child’s educational program then that representative will make the decisions.

Some Basic Planning Strategies for College

- Parents should register their child with the college of their choice and provide all the required documentation for registration. To receive special accommodation as mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it is important to register with the College Disability Services.
- Families should be familiar with the ADA, which mandates the laws as to how colleges must accommodate people with disabilities.
- Additionally, know if there is a special room in the dormitory or assigned location where your child can go during sensory meltdowns.
- Staff responsible for the dormitory should be trained and educated

to accommodate special-needs students. They must be aware of the accommodations necessary to make the college experience a pleasant experience.

What Can You Do, If Your Child Isn’t Ready for College on His or Her Own?

Paul Hippolitus, Director of Disabled Students Program, University of California Berkeley, developed a course called C2C+ or *Bridging the Gap from College to Careers* that is a university/community’s 17-lesson model that includes internships, peer and career mentoring, and placement assistance for individuals with disabilities. The course is offered at UC Berkeley, Silicon Valley Business Leadership Network, Orange County Business Leadership Network, San Diego State University, and San Diego Business Leadership Network. More and more of these types of programs are becoming available to students with autism across the country, filling the void that is left when our students exit the public school setting at 18 or 22 years of age and transition into secondary education or the community setting and find that they are not prepared to compete in either arena.

Most important, check out programs that transition students after high school into the work force or into college. There, they can learn to keep a budget, take care of themselves, and live independently because these are the cornerstones of these programs. Some unique and/or best programs in California are provided in this article (below) to show you how diverse the programs can be. You really need to visit them and find out their success rates in the ultimate goal, which is obtaining jobs for their students and/or supporting them

through the college experience. Their costs are not inconsequential because it's not only a critical decision for your child, it also requires housing, transportation, staffing, food, and many other support systems.

Transitional Residential Programs after High School Are Growing

Growing numbers of structured residential or camp programs are specifically transitional, meaning they teach life skills like budgeting, transportation, living with others outside the home, and college-level preparation coursework. Attending college requires students to develop self-determination skills, self-management, self-advocacy, and social skills, along with self-monitoring to excel and be successful.

We provide three examples of these programs—all very different in their structure and orientation—to show the many paths to success. These are just three in the California area, but numerous others are located in other states (one of which we wrote about in our May issue, the granddaddy of all transition programs in the U.S., TEACCH in North Carolina).

Meristem

Meristem is a 13-acre residential transition program serving young adults who have graduated or transitioned from high school. The campus is in Fair Oaks, California, a small agriculture suburb outside Sacramento. Integrated with a teacher training college, it adopts the biodynamic approach to learning, a spiritual-ethical-ecological approach to agriculture, gardens, food production, and nutrition. In addition, Meristem offers movement education,



A central aspect of the Meristem method involves preparing students for life after graduation. Throughout the three-year program, students build skills to enter the workplace or higher education. Many will work independently, others with assistance, but each graduate leaves with a greater sense of self-reliance. (photo courtesy of Meristem)

digital media, independent living skills, woodworking, metal working, jewelry making, textiles, and the performing arts. Meristem President Oliver Cheney explains that “Meristem is a steppingstone between school and employment.”

Currently, the three-year program houses 18 residents from across the country, ranging from 18 to 28 years of age. The modern dormitories have the capacity to house up to 65 residents. Meristem currently has 35 students and 12 of those students attend the Day Program from nearby communities. This private pay model is \$73,000 a year, from September to June, for the

full residential program and \$45,000 for the day program. Managing Director Michael Mancini explains that Meristem is a regional center client so it works alongside the California Department of Rehabilitation.

The Meristem residential school and vocational work training facilities are integrated with a teacher training college, with a farm apprenticeship program that follows a community-supported agriculture (CSA) model. The strong farm traineeship program curriculum involves the students caring for goats, sheep, and cattle; farming the land; and learning to work extensively with wood and metals.

MERISTEM

Rates (cost): \$45K (day program); \$73K (residential)

Numbers of students: 15–20 students per cohort; 60–75 students (full program)

Job acquisitions of these students: Personalized career pathways

Number of students enrolled in a secondary education system: 50% (higher education)

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“Bronze, copper and then iron,” says instructor Keith Gelber, “because this is the order of the Ages of Metals, and we want the student to make the analogy or connection through working with metal to his world around him.”

All the classes are conducted by highly successful model artisans, who use curriculum-based, task analysis-driven strategies and assessments designed to measure independence and real-world skill-based outcomes for the students. There is a student-run café, part of the students ‘real-world work’ experience curriculum, and a lovely bookstore on the campus, frequented by the locals. The bookstore and café provide the opportunity for students to develop increased social skills through community integration and inclusion. In addition, Meristem takes pride in incubating social skills enterprises for students and its graduates to run in the community.

The philosophy of the Meristem program is inspired by the well-known British model used throughout the

United Kingdom, Ruskin Mill Trust (RMT), which has a 35-year history of successful employment in the UK. Ruskin Mill Trust was founded by Aonghus Gordon in 1989. The Meristem model, like the UK Ruskin Mill Trust model, is unique in that it has a strong body/brain component with the ideology that it is through working with the hands that the brain develops. Meristem’s goal is to assist individuals with autism in transitioning to meaningful jobs and to increase self-image and self-esteem through practical applications of real-world skills.

Michael Mancini says, “We have a proven method to develop independence and self-determination for young adults with autism to be a part of their community and, at the same time, develop skill sets that will serve them in the future.”

Advance LA

Advance LA is a post-high school residential program located in Los Angeles on the American Jewish

University campus. It houses and supports seven adults with autism who attend nearby colleges: University of Southern California, California State University Northridge, Santa Monica College, Pierce Community College, and Valley College.

Director Holly Daniel feels that one reason the program has been so successful is because “it is designed and individually personalized so that each student can grow at his or her own pace.” Holly explains that Advance LA is geared to the student who graduates from high school and wants to attend a secondary academic college but is not quite ready to go off on his or her own.

Advance LA acts as the chaperone, so to speak, so the student gets the support that otherwise would not be available, unless the student lived at home with his or her parents.

At Advance LA, the student gets a feel for dorm life with enough adult support that allows him or her to experience college on an independent level but also provides the safety net that the student needs to be successful. The students are encouraged to become self-advocates and learn to handle their own cleaning, cooking, and banking while nurturing meaningful friendships in a dorm setting. The students also have access to the company van that transports them to and from classes and to all planned weekend social outings.

The three- to four-year program includes 18- to 30-year-olds and costs \$4,200 a month, which includes room, board, meals, and transportation.



A personalized residential program designed to fill the “gap year” and located in Los Angeles is Advance LA. Its motto is “Preparing young adults facing unique challenges for a successful future.” (photo courtesy of Advance LA)

ADVANCE LA

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One of the oldest residential and successful comprehensive transition programs for young adults on the autism spectrum and with learning disabilities is the College Internship Program (CIP), located in Berkeley, California. (photo courtesy of CIP)

College Internship Program (CIP)

CIP is a post-high school residential program that supports diploma track graduates who are both college and career bound. We spoke with Sarah Williams, the National Communications Coordinator of the College Internship Program Berkeley, and she explained that there are six CIP campuses across the United States: in Amherst, NY, Berkshire, MA, Bloomington, IN, Brevard, FL, Berkeley, CA, and Long Beach, CA. Founded in 1984—the first of its kind—the president of CIP is Dr. Dan McManmon. A psych evaluation is required. The cost of the program is approximately \$60,000 a year. CIP also offers several summer programs.

The 18- to 26-year-old students at Berkeley CIP live in apartments that are facilitated CIP sites with roommates in residences that are close to the secondary education colleges and campuses that they attend. In addition to supporting the students in their academic goals, CIP also provides them with a structured 30-hour-a-week life

skills programs aligned with a weekend mandatory recreational activities program that includes attending ballgames, visiting art museums, and shopping at farmer's markets.

The CIP program promotes independent living as well as academic success for the candidates through a structured work/internship-driven program. Some of the internships that the Berkeley campus offer are with Berkeley Community Media, Alameda County Food Bank, Partnerships for Change, East Bay Humane Society, Berkeley Public Library, KPFA Radio Station, Spectrum School mentoring positions, Satellite Housing, World Institute on Disability, Alta Bates Hospital, The Bridge Church, Oakland Zoo, Hearts Leap Preschool assistant,

CIP

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St. Vincent de Paul—feeding the homeless, and the YMCA.

The CIP model is assessment driven and utilizes the person-centered planning approach, which promotes working with each student to develop his or her own goals, dreams, and hopes for a successful future. ■

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SIDEBAR

What Is the Individual Transition Plan and Why Is It Critical for Students with Autism?

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Transitioning from high school into the adult world is overwhelming for any student, but it can be even more challenging for students and families with autism.

To ease these transitions and make them as smooth as possible, teachers and school personnel, along with others (e.g., families, community agencies) are required by law to assist students with disabilities in middle school and well before they transition from high school. They're charged with selecting appropriate goals so students can develop the requisite skills needed to achieve these goals. Called the individual transition plan (ITP), three main areas should be addressed: *Work*: A job students want and might be good at doing; *Living*: A location where they might like to live; and *Community involvement*: Activities they would like to undertake to become a part of their community after they finish high school, which might continue throughout adulthood. The process takes place generally at the age of 16, but some states—like California, North Carolina, and Texas—begin earlier at age 14. The secondary transition planning is a federal mandate, first authorized in the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(IDEA) and reauthorized in IDEA 2004, specifying that the transition services are to begin by 16 years of age instead of the 1997 mandate of 14. It also included a “coordinated set of activities designed within a result-oriented process” focused on improving both academic and functional achievement of the student with a disability to facilitate movement from school into post school life.

Should the student attend the ITP?

The ITP process *requires* that the student be invited to the ITP meeting because the plan should be put together to prepare the child for life.

The student should be a part of the process because the transition services should be based on the individual's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests. More importantly, the student needs to learn self-advocacy at an earlier age, particularly if he or she plans to go to college, where the parent(s) cannot act as advocates.

How do we ensure that the ITP process is in compliance with the IDEA 2004 mandate?

The student's annual individualized education program (IEP) goals should be related to the student's transition services required for success, and they should align with post-secondary goals. To derive the goals, the student should be given an informal or formal transitioning assessment, using a tool like WorkSmart, Transition Planning Inventory (TPI), YES! Choicemaker Self-Determination Assessment, and Self-Directed Employment Assessment or COPs. The goals for the IEP should come directly out of the transition assessment tool results, so the team—including the student—knows where the student's strengths lie in work, living, and social skill sets. The “8 Indicator Compliance Checklist”

indicates goals that are measurable and indicate mastery of skills.

Why is the IEP not working effectively?

The IDEA 1997 and 2004 transition revisions were both well meaning and direct descendants from the 1975 Public Law 94-142, but the program has to be viewed skeptically at best because less than 20% of all graduating students on the autism spectrum have jobs—even inconsequential jobs—after high school and, worse, the percentages become smaller over time. Most go home and end up staying there, which is a human tragedy however it's viewed. Sadly, this is known as the “school-to-couch” model.

Because unemployment for our youth with autism hovers at 80%, it is time for educators to present a truthful idea of what the student is capable of doing for a living, which means that we might want to re-think altogether the way we are addressing/interpreting the ITP transitioning process, the jobs, and living accommodations after high school in this country. One of the reasons for these dismal statistics may be the lack of realism on the part of IEP team members when they undertake the *Person Centered Planning* element, which focuses on where the student's skill set in core reading and math actually lies and how this skill set can equate to a paying job.

IEP team members and, especially, parents often want to honor a student's dreams, but—when that student's case history indicates that he/she will not be a scientist, an astronaut, a veterinarian, or have a three-picture deal at Warner Brothers Studio in Hollywood—we must ask ourselves if we are really indeed serving the student well by entertaining these fantasy dreams of improbable employment. In reality, the student may be able to work in a vet's office or neighborhood shelter, gain employment on the Warner Brothers

lot, or work in a hospital, but the IEP team needs to address *practical* job options for students who are not going to transition into a four-year college, or even a two-year community college, because they don't have the academic background to continue the academic route. These students should be directed down a path that will give them *a realistic idea of job options* when they transition out of the public school setting.

The downfall of not entertaining true options earlier is that the student often becomes attached to the fantasy job and has an impractical idea of where he or she might fit in. If the child has visions of becoming a scientist, vet, or astronaut in the American job market, he or she may become reluctant to seek jobs outside these unlikely positions, even though other jobs may more likely meet his or her skill set and life style. An unrealistic evaluation of the student's academic capabilities and skill set contributes to the existing 80% unemployment statistic.

For the student who wants to be a scientist, why not have him or her research jobs that are available in a university science department? Or companies that perform medical research? Or organizations where he or she can still be working in the area of interest? In the IEP team meetings, we need to begin to present a more realistic approach to job options so the student can fit into the work force. We stand a far better chance of getting the outside community employers' and stakeholders' support to help our youth be successful *if we are realistic* in using past success in the academic institution as a barometer.

■ ***Vocation programs have been phased out***

Parents also need to understand that there is now a huge absence of vocational education in high schools,

which consists of programs that may well have been a route through which many children on the autism spectrum could find great success and well-paying jobs after graduation.

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917—the law that first authorized federal funding for vocational education in American schools—explicitly described vocational education as “preparation for careers not requiring a bachelor's degree.” Vocational education was not designed to prepare students for college.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the standards and accountability movement in the school systems was taking hold, so the states began to write academic standards—or goals—for what students should learn (and, in the process, what wasn't critical, which was reflected in the elimination of many subjects that previously had been “core courses”). Because the goals were tied to funding, many courses that could have been perfect for students on the autism spectrum began to disappear from the school curriculum at the same time that autism diagnoses were expanding exponentially.

In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act, a law requiring states to test their students every year and to ensure that all students would eventually be proficient in math and reading *in exchange for federal education funding*. This was the beginning of the end of vocational training in this country.

The vocational programs in the schools didn't have the academic faculty to meet the law's requirements. However, they often had skilled labor experts/workers to teach skills like metal working, wood working, horticulture, bakery and culinary arts, automobile mechanics, and cosmetology. The instructors themselves were not considered “the academic piece” that would fulfill the

No Child Left Behind Act's standards. So, the very skill sets that could benefit our youth on the autism spectrum the most—because what they learn in vocational training could be turned into meaningful jobs—were rapidly wiped out, no longer available in the public school setting.

To look at it another way, those in the academic school setting (the ITP team) can assess and tell you what your child is good at or could be good at that would allow him or her to get a job after graduation from high school—as per the 2004 IDEA ITP mandate—but they can't TEACH those skills because the majority of schools doesn't have the vocational programs any longer to do so.

In addition, the programs for independent living skills (e.g., computer science, animation, art, home economics, shop, drafting, advertising/layout/design, photography, economics, banking, budgeting) only exist in the Moderate/Severe Special Day Programs in most schools. They're generally not available for our Asperger's and higher functioning students with autism, who also could benefit from vocational knowledge if they are to live self-determined lives independently after high school. ■

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