

Key points:

- Consider IEP goals when creating transition plan
- Set postsecondary goals for child to attain after high school
- Determine skills needed to reach postsecondary goals

Experts: Postsecondary goals should be ‘natural extension’ of IEP

Must a student’s postsecondary goals match her IEP goals?

Not according to the court in *High v. Exeter Township School District*, [54 IDELR 17](#) (E.D. Pa. 2010). Here, the court explained the IDEA does not require a student’s transition plan to dictate her IEP goals.

“While it may be ideal if a transition plan influences IEP goals, a newly identified transition goal will not change the ability of a child to progress at a higher rate academically,” the judge wrote.

In this case, the IEP for a high school junior with LDs called for her to reach a sixth-grade reading level by the end of the year; her transition plan focused on college preparedness.

While IEP and transition plan goals need not match, they should inform one another, experts say.

“The goals in a student’s IEP can be a really good guide to what is realistic for a student because they indicate student skill levels,” says Sara Woolverton, director of special education for the [Santa Monica-Malibu \(Calif.\) Unified School District](#).

Here are tips in this area:

Review IEP goals when developing transition plan. If a student’s IEP goals focus on self-help skills, “it doesn’t make much sense to write a transition plan that focuses on attending a four-year college,” says [Nina Gupta](#), a school attorney with [Brock Clay](#) in Georgia.

Think of the transition plan as a “natural extension of IEPs developed over the years but with a different point of view,” adds [Alisia St. Florian](#), a school attorney with Massachusetts-based [Murphy, Hesse, Toomey & Lehane LLP](#).

She gives the example of a student whose IEP calls for him to improve daily living skills. When developing his transition plan, “think about how the student can work on that goal in a community-based environment,” St. Florian says. For example, postsecondary daily living skills may include learning how to use public transportation or applying for a job.

Also, be cognizant of goals that have never appeared in a student’s IEP, St. Florian says. For example, if a student has never had an IEP goal that focused on developing social skills, you shouldn’t write a transition goal that calls for the improvement of social skills.

“You don’t want to write a goal that the student can achieve the next day, just as you wouldn’t write a goal that is unachievable,” she says.

Write postsecondary goals that focus on life after school. “It is still really common for people to think of postsecondary goals as instructional goals . . . that identify a skill to be learned while in school,” Woolverton says. This misunderstanding, she says, leads to employment goals such as, “Sara will fill out a job application” or postsecondary education and training goals that say, “Sara will research welding programs.”

“I know this is a paradigm shift from the days when transition plans were afterthoughts. [People] wrote transition goals [with] things like ‘will develop a resume’ instead of thinking past school,” Woolverton adds.

Instead, begin each transition statement with “upon leaving high school” or “after graduation from high school,” Woolverton says. This will help the IEP team “stay focused on writing actual post-school goals in the transition plan instead of instructional goals,” she says.

For example, you may write that upon leaving high school, the student will attend community college to study culinary arts and work in food preparation in a restaurant. After identifying the post-school goals, write instructional goals that address the skills needed for those activities. They may include reading and writing skills necessary for community college and the ability to understand measurements and use fractions for cooking.

Determine skills needed to attain postsecondary goals. If a student’s postsecondary goal is to attend college, and the IEP team agrees this is a reasonable goal, then the team should develop instructional goals that will give the student skills needed to be successful in college. For instance,

goals may address reading comprehension, writing augmentative papers, organizing and managing assignments, and self-advocating, Woolverton says.

You can always go back and revise the student's postsecondary goals if you discover a disconnect between those goals and the student's current skill set, she notes.

Imagine, for example, you develop a postsecondary goal for a student that says he will attend college after high school. If the most realistic language arts IEP goal for the student is to read 10 new words from the second-grade reading list, the team should reasonably discuss whether these reading skills are going to help the student achieve his goal of attending college, Woolverton says. If not, the postsecondary goal is not realistic, and the team should revisit the transition plan.

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- Case File: [11th-grader's plan to attend college doesn't invalidate modest reading goal](#) (Feb. 17)
- [Begin meetings with postsecondary goals -- not paperwork -- in mind](#) (Dec. 3)
- Checklist: [Developing Postsecondary Goals -- Questions to Consider](#)

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Consider child's interests when developing transition plan

IEP teams sometimes write a transition goal based on what a student wants to do without reference to what a student can reasonably be expected to do, says Sara Woolverton, director of special education for the [Santa Monica-Malibu \(Calif.\) Unified School District](#).

She recalls an IEP meeting where "the team was writing as a post-school outcome that the student would be a professional basketball player, because that is what the student said he wanted to be," she says. "The student was a wheelchair-bound young man with an IQ of about 60."

You must look at the individual student and goal when questioning whether a goal is attainable, says [Nina Gupta](#), a school attorney with [Brock Clay](#) in Georgia.

In *High v. Exeter Township School District*, [54 IDELR 17](#) (E.D. Pa. 2010), a high school junior with LDs may have had her sights set on college, but that did not invalidate an IEP goal that called for her to read at a sixth-grade level by the end of the year. The court held that the goal was reasonable in light of the student's severe deficits.

"It does seem like a reasonable goal for the student in question to attend college," Gupta says. "A local college said that she would simply need some remediation, which 90 percent of its students needed, so it doesn't look like it was pie-in-the-sky thinking for her to go to that college. In other circumstances, it might be unrealistic."

Break the goal into parts. There is nothing wrong with a student's goal to attend college if the IEP team determines how she can slowly work toward that goal, says [Alisia St. Florian](#), a school attorney with Massachusetts-based [Murphy, Hesse, Toomey & Lehane LLP](#).

In *Exeter Township*, for example, the district's transitions coordinator helped the student prepare for college by transferring her to a college-track English class, helping her apply and obtain accommodations for the PSAT and SAT, sending her to a college fair, and identifying specific postsecondary education programs related to her interests.

In most states, students can have a transition plan from age 16-22. "That gives the student a period of time to work toward long-term goals," St. Florian says.

If, at the first transition meeting, the parent or student starts talking about a long-term goal that seems out of reach, such as attending a four-

year college, take a “building block approach,” St. Florian says. In other words, break down the ultimate goal into smaller goals the student can accomplish over time.

For example, if the student’s goal is to attend a four-year college, but the IEP team does not feel she is ready for that yet, have her take a community college course. “She can do that while also holding a job, interning or volunteering,” St. Florian says.

Doing so will allow the student to think about whether college is something she really wants to pursue, St. Florian says. “Always convey openness to coming back to the table and making revisions to the transition plan as necessary,” she says.

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