***Key points:***
**Begin transition planning early, encourage families to participate throughout process**
**Thoroughly document in IEPs transition plans that provide appropriate, measurable goals, objectives**
**Monitor results, allow plans to evolve with students' changing abilities, interests**

**Teach 7 transition planning practices to avoid litigation**

In *Newark City School District,* [58 IDELR 26](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetCase?cite=58+IDELR+26) (SEA OH 2011), an Ohio school district created a transition plan that delegated to a family full responsibility for providing transition [services](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetStory?docid=7568144&printer=1). It also failed to update the plan to reflect a change in the child's educational goals until two months after it said it was notified.

The ED found that the transition plan did not satisfy the IDEA because parents and students do not provide services; school districts and outside agencies do. What's more, the IEP had not been revised in a timely manner. To avoid similar parent-led litigation, experts advise you teach these seven transition planning practices to your staff.

**1. Begin planning early.** IDEA 2004 requires that a [transition plan](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetDocByTitle?doctitle=SmartStart:+IEPs+--+Transition+Planning+(Procedural+Requirements)) be included in an IEP beginning no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16. Yet, Congress anticipated that [schools](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetStory?docid=7568144&printer=1) would begin the process of thinking about individualized and appropriate transition services for students earlier than that, according to [Mark Kamleiter,](http://www.avvo.com/attorneys/33712-fl-mark-kamleiter-1233198/website.html) a founding member of the Florida Association of Special Education Attorneys who represents children with disabilities. What can occur, he said, is that school districts wait until a child's last year in school to provide services. "That's not at all what the law envisions."

**2. Encourage families to participate.** Families are an integral part of the IEP and transition planning process, but getting them to participate can be frustrating, said Janice Coe, an area coordinator for the [School District of Palm Beach County's](http://www.palmbeachschools.org/) [Department of Exceptional Student Education](http://www.palmbeachschools.org/ese/index.asp) in Florida. One way her district encourages families to participate is with a Parents as Liaisons program. PALS are parents of students with disabilities enrolled in the district who have received specialized training in IDEA, state law, IEPs, Section 504 plans, mediation, classroom strategies, inclusion, and advocacy.

The PALS program facilitates positive, proactive communication between parents and educators and encourages families to participate in monthly ESE advisory board meetings and biannual family forums. Whichever methods you use, Coe said, "the biggest thing is to make sure the parent and child realize that they're *just* as important as everybody around that table."

**3. Put yourself in parents' shoes.** When parents feel that a school is not taking planning seriously enough, they sue. "I have seen IEPs . . . for young people who were preparing to leave school [that] consisted of the telephone number for [vocational rehabilitation]," Kamleiter said. "That kind of thing really upsets parents." As do IEPs that reflect low expectations. Having children with disabilities take a bus to the local hospital to wipe down the [cafeteria tables](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetStory?docid=7568144&printer=1) year after year incenses parents. "One could argue that it's all the school can do for them," Kamleiter said, "but I think that's not true for most kids."

**4. Help families through the process.** Some students say it is their goal to play for the NFL, even though they're not playing football in high school. Others have high aspirations in other areas of interest that are equally unrealistic. Helping them set realistic transition goals can be a challenge that can be overcome by doing vocational assessments, Coe said. It is also important to help families sort through the myriad agencies available to identify the right [services.](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetDocByTitle?doctitle=SmartStart:+FAPE+--+Transition+Services) You can do this by providing parents with a "who you can go to" document and have agency representatives participate in family forums. Coe also advises parents to sign up for services that have long waiting lists.

**5. Document thoroughly.** IEPs that don't thoroughly document transition services and supports spark litigation because "they are depriving the students and parents of the chance to actually see and know what the services are . . . and then advocate for better services if they're necessary," Kamleiter said.

For example, in *Strongsville City School District*, [59 IDELR 176](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/servlet/GetCase?cite=59+IDELR+176) (SEA OH 2012), the Ohio ED determined that a district failed to provide appropriate and measurable transition goals and objectives for a high schooler with ADHD. In this case, the district stated an employment goal for the student that was too academic in nature. The employment goal merely reflected the student's desire to attend college and provided that he would a take college preparatory class. In such cases, "the services are written 'the child will do this, the child will do that,'" Kamleiter said. "Well that's nice, but the parents want to know what the school's supposed to do."

**6. Listen actively.** Understanding a child's limitations and parents' expectations is the key to helping the family find the best transitional goals, Coe said. Using active listening skills is crucial because parents need to know that their concerns are being heard. Sometimes it's not a matter of finding solutions, but rather "listening to how they feel," she said. "Always remember that the parents are a voice to listen to, that they are an equal member of the team."

**7. Monitor results and review plans often.** Allow transition plans to evolve with students' changing abilities, interests, and desires. Otherwise, imagine yourself on the stand being cross-examined by Kamleiter:

"Goals are supposed to be measurable, so do your goals show that he's being successful?"

"He's been successful."

"Well how long has he been successful wiping down tables?"

"Well, for several years now."

"He's probably pretty good at it! Don't you think it would be a good idea to move along to something else?"

*See also:*
[Special educators urged to claim place in college-, career-ready debate](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/index.jsp?contentId=7530324) *(July 26)*
[OSEP not alone in trying to help transition-age youth find employment](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/index.jsp?contentId=7528125) *(July 24)*
[Work placements must reflect LRE principles, OSEP says](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/index.jsp?contentId=7510870) *(June 27)*

*For more stories and guidance on this topic, see the* [Postsecondary Transition Roundup.](http://www.specialedconnection.com/LrpSecStoryTool/index.jsp?contentId=7388502)

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**September 19, 2012**

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