



## **Designing, Evaluating, and Scaling Inclusive Special Education Curriculum Frameworks and Transition-Focused Programs to Improve Postsecondary Readiness and Workforce Integration for High School Students with Disabilities in Underserved Districts**

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### **Abstract**

High school students with disabilities, particularly those in underserved districts, continue to experience persistent inequities in postsecondary enrollment, workforce participation, and adult independence. Despite long-established federal mandates and growing national urgency, transition services remain inconsistently implemented and are often treated as procedural compliance rather than as measurable preparation systems. This white paper proposes a district-scale framework for designing, evaluating, and scaling inclusive curriculum access and transition-focused systems that improve postsecondary readiness and workforce integration for transition-age youth with disabilities. The framework is aligned with evidence-based predictors of post-school success and emphasizes inclusive instructional design, student self-determination, work-based learning, interagency partnerships, and outcome-based evaluation. This paper argues that transition programming must be treated as a district-level instructional coordination initiative replicable, sustainable, and measurable, especially in high-need districts where the consequences of fragmented transition programming are most significant.

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### **Keywords**

Inclusive education; special education transition; secondary transition services; work-based learning; Universal Design for Learning; instructional coordination; underserved school districts; post-secondary readiness; disability workforce inclusion; self-determination.

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### **1. Executive Summary and Introduction**

#### **1.1 Executive Summary**

High school students with disabilities remain among the nation's most persistently underserved populations in postsecondary readiness and workforce preparation. Despite longstanding federal mandates requiring transition services, inclusive access to rigorous instruction, and coordinated support planning, national data and policy analyses continue to



show that youth with disabilities experience lower rates of postsecondary enrollment, reduced labor force participation, and diminished access to career-connected opportunities compared to their nondisabled peers.<sup>1</sup> These disparities are amplified in underserved school districts where resource limitations, staffing constraints, reduced community partnerships, and inconsistent program infrastructure diminish the availability and quality of transition services.<sup>2</sup>

This white paper proposes a district-scale framework for designing, evaluating, and scaling inclusive special education curriculum systems and transition-focused program models that improve postsecondary readiness and workforce integration for high school students with disabilities in underserved districts. The framework is built to support a systems-level approach consistent with the role and impact profile of an Instructional Coordinator. It emphasizes that transition programming must operate as an integrated instructional and programmatic systemlinking rigorous inclusive curriculum access, measurable postsecondary planning, career development and work-based learning, interagency collaboration, and data-driven evaluation.

The proposed framework addresses an urgent national concern and is grounded in three core realities:

1. **Transition outcomes for youth with disabilities remain consistently unequal.** Youth with disabilities continue to experience significantly reduced labor force participation rates, and these gaps persist into adulthood, indicating a systemic shortfall in the pipeline from school to employment.<sup>3</sup>
2. **Educational inequities are greatest in high-poverty and underserved districts.** National civil rights reporting and equity-focused federal priorities increasingly identify disparities in access to rigorous coursework, inclusive environments, and support systems as key drivers of outcome gaps.<sup>4</sup>
3. **Evidence-based models exist but are not consistently scaled.** Decades of transition research identify the strongest predictors of post-school success, including inclusive education, career development, vocational education, self-determination, and work-based learning; however, many districts lack structured systems to implement these practices as district-wide programs rather than isolated services.<sup>5</sup>

The framework is designed to produce scalable improvements and measurable outcomes by structuring the transition system around five integrated pillars:

- **Inclusive Curriculum Access and Instructional Equity** (using Universal Design for Learning, co-teaching, and standards-aligned accommodations)<sup>6</sup>
- **Integrated Transition Planning and Student Self-Determination** (student-led planning, measurable postsecondary goals, and self-advocacy development)<sup>7</sup>
- **Career Pathways and Work-Based Learning** (embedded internships, job shadowing, workplace readiness instruction, and employer partnerships)<sup>5</sup>
- **Interagency Collaboration Infrastructure** (formal partnerships with vocational rehabilitation agencies, workforce boards, and postsecondary providers)<sup>1</sup>
- **Data-Driven Evaluation and Continuous Improvement** (district-level accountability and long-term outcome measurement<sup>1</sup>



By centering transition programming as a district-level instructional systems initiative, the framework offers districts a replicable pathway for increasing graduation outcomes, improving postsecondary enrollment and credential attainment, and advancing workforce integration while directly supporting federal equity priorities and disability civil rights principles. This paper concludes that districts adopting inclusive and transition-focused instructional coordination models are positioned to create long-term systemic change, particularly in underserved communities where the current gaps are widest and the urgency is greatest.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Introduction

The transition from high school to adulthood represents one of the most consequential developmental and systemic intersections in public education. For students with disabilities, this period is not merely a time of graduation planning—it is the point at which educational inclusion, civil rights protections, workforce readiness, and long-term independence converge. National education policy has long recognized the central role of transition programming, requiring that students with disabilities receive transition services to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. Despite decades of statutory mandates, many students still leave high school without measurable readiness for postsecondary success, and underserved districts remain disproportionately affected.<sup>1</sup>

The persistence of these gaps demonstrates that transition programming must be reconceptualized not as an isolated special education service or annual compliance requirement, but as a scalable district-level system of instruction, planning, partnership, and evaluation. In practice, transition planning has often been implemented as a procedural feature of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), with limited integration into curriculum design, career development, and long-term outcome accountability.<sup>7</sup> As a result, youth with disabilities frequently graduate without exposure to sustained career pathways, without adequate self-determination and self-advocacy training, and without the coordinated interagency supports necessary to bridge school-based programming to adult services and employment.<sup>5</sup>

This paper addresses a pressing national concern: how to build and scale inclusive, transition-focused systems that improve outcomes for students with disabilities at the population level. It emphasizes underserved districts because systemic barriers in these environments tend to be both more severe and more consequential. In high-poverty districts, shortages of specialized staff, limited work-based learning partnerships, reduced access to rigorous coursework, and inconsistent transition coordination frequently result in students with disabilities receiving diminished preparation for adulthood.<sup>4</sup> These conditions reinforce cycles of economic exclusion and contribute to long-term disparities in employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

From a national workforce perspective, these disparities represent not only an equity issue but a long-term economic concern. Federal labor statistics consistently show that individuals with disabilities experience lower employment rates and reduced labor force participation, and these patterns are rooted in early pipeline failures—particularly in secondary education and transition planning.<sup>3</sup> Strengthening high school transition systems, therefore, directly supports broader national objectives related to workforce inclusion, labor market participation, and the reduction of long-term dependency.



From an educational equity perspective, transition failure is increasingly recognized as a civil rights issue. When students with disabilities are systematically excluded from rigorous curriculum access, career-connected learning, and postsecondary preparation supports, the result is a form of inequitable educational opportunity that conflicts with federal priorities emphasizing inclusion and equal access.<sup>2</sup> The Department of Education's strategic priorities increasingly focus on inclusive environments and postsecondary success as indicators of equity and institutional effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, the knowledge base for improving transition outcomes is well established. Decades of research have identified the strongest evidence-based predictors of post-school success for students with disabilities. These include inclusive academic instruction, career awareness and vocational education, work-based learning experiences, self-determination development, interagency collaboration, and the alignment of transition services with measurable postsecondary goals.<sup>5</sup> While these practices are widely recognized in professional literature and technical assistance guidance, they remain inconsistently implemented, under-funded, and rarely scaled across districts in a sustained manner.<sup>1</sup>

This paper proposes that the central challenge is not the lack of effective strategies but the lack of scalable systems. Most transition interventions remain dependent on isolated staff expertise, short-term grants, or limited program capacity. Without district-wide infrastructure, transition programming becomes vulnerable to turnover, inconsistent training, and uneven access across schools.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, a district-level framework coordinated through instructional leadership structures can institutionalize inclusive curriculum access and transition programming as measurable, sustainable systems that produce consistent outcomes across student populations.

Accordingly, this paper introduces a district-scale framework structured around five integrated pillars: inclusive curriculum access and Universal Design for Learning; structured transition planning and student self-determination; work-based learning and career pathway development; interagency and community partnership infrastructure; and data-driven program evaluation with continuous improvement.<sup>6</sup> The framework is designed to support district leaders and Instructional Coordinators seeking to strengthen long-term outcomes for transition-age youth through scalable, evidence-based program architecture.

## **2. National Policy Context and Current Federal Priorities**

Three major federal frameworks define the national urgency and policy foundation for improving transition outcomes for high school students with disabilities, particularly in underserved districts: (1) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), (2) the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and (3) the U.S. Department of Education's Strategic Plan emphasizing equity, inclusion, and postsecondary success. Collectively, these frameworks establish that transition programming is not an optional feature of special education; rather, it is a federally supported educational and workforce priority grounded in both civil rights principles and national economic needs.

### **2.1 IDEA: Transition Services as a Legal Entitlement**



IDEA requires that transition services be included within each eligible student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and structured around measurable postsecondary goals that address education, training, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living.<sup>9</sup> Under IDEA, transition planning functions as a critical bridge between secondary education and adult life, and the law's intent is explicit: students with disabilities must be prepared for "further education, employment, and independent living," ensuring that post-school readiness is part of the educational entitlement itself.

In addition, IDEA establishes a presumption of access to instruction in the least restrictive environment (LRE), requiring that students with disabilities be educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.<sup>10</sup> This legal presumption directly impacts transition programming because inclusive environments expand access to rigorous academic instruction, social capital development, and exposure to higher expectationsconditions associated with stronger postsecondary outcomes. An effective transition framework must therefore incorporate inclusive curriculum access as a structural requirement rather than a discretionary practice, ensuring students are not segregated from the instructional opportunities that shape college and career readiness.

## **2.2 WIOA: Workforce Integration and Interagency Collaboration**

WIOA strengthened the federal emphasis on the transition-to-employment pipeline by requiring vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies to allocate at least 15% of federal VR funds toward pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) and to formalize collaboration with education agencies.<sup>11</sup> This federal mandate reflects a substantial policy shift: transition services must be tied not only to school-based planning but also to real-world workforce integration, credential development, and meaningful work-based learning opportunities.

Under WIOA, Pre-ETS includes job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on postsecondary options, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy. These provisions position transition planning as a shared responsibility between schools and workforce agencies, reinforcing that transition outcomes are not solely educational issues but matters of national workforce development and disability inclusion. For districts, this framework provides both authority and urgency to build formal partnerships with VR agencies and local workforce boards and to embed employment-linked transition services into secondary programming.

## **2.3 Department of Education Strategic Goals: Equity and Postsecondary Access**

The U.S. Department of Education's current Strategic Plan prioritizes equity-driven reforms to improve student access to inclusive environments and postsecondary success, particularly for underserved populations.<sup>12</sup> Students with disabilities are explicitly within the scope of these goals, reinforcing that improving transition outcomes is not a niche issueit is a national education policy objective tied to federal accountability measures, inclusive learning, and economic participation.

The Department's emphasis on equity further strengthens the policy foundation for addressing disproportional transition failure in under-resourced districts. When students with disabilities experience restricted access to rigorous instruction, career pathways, and inclusive



opportunities, the result is not only a disability services gap but a systemic equity deficit. The Strategic Plan therefore provides a policy rationale for districts to adopt scalable, evidence-based systems that increase postsecondary enrollment, career readiness, and workforce participation for transition-age youth with disabilities as part of a broader national equity agenda.

### **3. Problem Statement: Why Underserved Districts Face Disproportionate Transition Failure**

Despite extensive policy infrastructure, students with disabilities continue to leave high school unprepared for adulthood due to several systemic failures that occur most acutely in underserved districts. These failures reflect persistent gaps between legal mandates and practical implementation. They also demonstrate why transition programming must be addressed as a district-level instructional and programmatic system rather than as isolated compliance tasks.

#### **3.1 Fragmented Transition Programming**

In many districts, transition services are treated as a compliance requirement rather than a structured system. IEP transition goals may be generalized, poorly individualized, or disconnected from classroom instruction, vocational exposure, and agency supports.<sup>13</sup> In such settings, transition services can become “paper-based” rather than “outcome-based,” meaning that while legal forms may be completed, students do not receive sustained programming that builds postsecondary readiness.

Fragmentation often manifests as a lack of continuity across grade levels, limited collaboration between general and special education staff, and weak integration of transition planning into curricular decisions. Students may graduate without the necessary competencies in self-advocacy, work readiness, and functional independence, even when their IEPs contain nominal transition statements. This disconnect is a central reason why postsecondary outcome gaps persist despite decades of policy attention.

#### **3.2 Limited Inclusive Access to Rigorous Instruction**

Students with disabilities in high-poverty districts frequently experience reduced exposure to college-preparatory curriculum and career-connected learning opportunities.<sup>14</sup> This inequitable access restricts postsecondary options before graduation, reduces readiness for credentialing pathways, and limits the development of academic skills needed for success in postsecondary education.

Moreover, when students are removed from rigorous learning environments, their access to higher expectations and peer modeling diminishes, which may contribute to lower achievement and reduced confidence. Rigorous academic access is therefore not merely an educational objective—it is a structural condition for equitable transition outcomes.

#### **3.3 Lack of Work-Based Learning and Career Development Infrastructure**



Work-based learning opportunities are evidence-based predictor of successful post-school employment are often limited or absent, especially in rural or underfunded districts.<sup>15</sup> Where programs exist, they frequently serve only select populations rather than being designed for inclusive participation. This lack of infrastructure results in students with disabilities graduating without exposure to real workplace environments, employer expectations, or career pathways that align with their strengths.

Without work-based learning, transition systems are weakened because students cannot translate academic skills into applied competency. This is particularly damaging in underserved districts where students may already face limited community resources, reduced transportation access, and fewer employer partnerships. The absence of career development infrastructure, therefore, reinforces long-term employment disparities for individuals with disabilities.

## **4. Proposed Framework: Inclusive Transition-Focused Special Education Systems**

This paper proposes a district-scale framework with five integrated pillars. The framework is structured to be implemented through instructional coordination rather than through isolated classroom-based interventions. Its central objective is to ensure that inclusive curriculum access and transition programming operate as a unified system that improves measurable postsecondary and workforce outcomes for high school students with disabilities.

### **4.1 Inclusive Curriculum Access and Universal Design**

The framework requires adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and co-teaching models to ensure that students with disabilities can access rigorous, standards-aligned instruction in general education classrooms.<sup>16</sup> Instructional Coordinators play a central role in guaranteeing curricular accessibility, aligning accommodations to instructional objectives, and guiding educators toward high expectations.

At the district level, this includes ensuring that curriculum pathways do not exclude students with disabilities from college-preparatory coursework or career and technical education tracks. It also requires systematic teacher support through coaching, common planning structures, and evidence-based inclusive teaching strategies that reduce reliance on segregation.

### **4.2 Integrated Transition Planning and Student Self-Determination**

Transition services must be operationalized as a structured progression beginning in early high school, integrating measurable postsecondary goals with explicit self-determination instruction and student-led planning.<sup>17</sup> Students must graduate with functional transition portfolios including resumes, skill profiles, documentation of accommodations, and agency linkages.

This pillar emphasizes that student voice is not incidental; it is essential. Self-determination instruction develops students' ability to identify goals, advocate for accommodations,



evaluate pathways, and participate meaningfully in transition planning. This is especially critical in underserved contexts where families may have limited access to postsecondary navigation resources. A strong transition framework, therefore, institutionalizes student empowerment as a consistent instructional outcome.

### **4.3 Career Pathways and Work-Based Learning as Core Instructional Components**

Work-based learning is incorporated as a central instructional mechanism—not an extracurricular feature. This includes internships, job shadowing, supported employment partnerships, and skill-building workplace simulations that align with WIOA’s pre-employment transition services model.<sup>18</sup>

District implementation requires formal structures to expand partnerships and ensure inclusive participation. Work-based learning must be integrated into student schedules, supported through transportation and mentorship models, and embedded into transition planning so that each student experiences authentic career exposure before graduation.

### **4.4 Interagency and Community Partnership Infrastructure**

Districts must formalize partnerships with vocational rehabilitation offices, employers, workforce boards, and community colleges through MOUs to ensure sustained collaboration in service delivery.<sup>19</sup> Interagency presence must be normalized within IEP planning and transition services delivery.

This pillar addresses one of the most persistent weaknesses in transition programming: lack of continuity after graduation. By formalizing collaboration, districts can ensure students connect to adult services and postsecondary pathways before exiting high school. The result is a coordinated “handoff system” rather than a post-graduation cliff.

### **4.5 Data-Driven Program Evaluation and Continuous Improvement**

A core requirement is establishing accountability measures tied to both compliance and outcomes. Metrics include graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, employment outcomes, program participation, and long-term follow-up indicators aligned with IDEA’s post-school outcomes reporting.<sup>20</sup> Program evaluation ensures not only effectiveness but scalability and fidelity.

This pillar ensures that districts do not rely on anecdotal success or isolated exemplary cases. Instead, the framework is designed for measurable improvement, enabling districts to refine implementation, demonstrate outcomes to stakeholders, and justify expansion through evidence.

## **5. Scalability and Replicability Strategy**

Scalability depends on designing programs that are:

- District-implemented rather than teacher-dependent



- Replicable across diverse district contexts
- Sustainable through braided funding
- Adaptable without losing fidelity

To achieve systemic improvement, transition frameworks must be designed to scale beyond a single school and remain effective amid staffing changes, demographic shifts, and resource constraints.

### **5.1 Pilot-to-Scale Model**

The initiative should begin with a pilot in selected high schools, followed by a phased, district-wide expansion supported by training and evaluation infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Pilot sites function as demonstration laboratories, allowing districts to refine implementation models before replication.

Successful pilots should produce a replicable toolkit, including curriculum access procedures, transition planning protocols, work-based learning partnership models, and performance indicators tied to measurable outcomes.

### **5.2 Training and Capacity Building**

Sustainability requires a train-the-trainer model in which pilot educators develop district-level professional learning systems that embed inclusive transition programming into routine instructional practice.<sup>22</sup> This pillar ensures that the framework does not depend on one specialist or isolated expertise.

Instead, districts establish institutional capacity: educators are trained systematically, instructional leaders are equipped to monitor implementation, and professional learning becomes continuous rather than episodic.

### **5.3 Funding Alignment**

The framework allows districts to braid IDEA funding, VR service allocations, Perkins Career and Technical Education resources, and equity-driven competitive grants to sustain long-term implementation.<sup>23</sup> This funding alignment is essential for underserved districts where budget constraints often undermine program continuity.

By building funding sustainability into design, districts increase long-term feasibility and reduce dependence on short-term grant cycles.

## **6. Urgency and National Importance**

This endeavor addresses urgent national concerns:

1. **Economic and workforce needs:** Increasing workforce participation among individuals with disabilities strengthens the national labor supply and reduces long-term dependency costs.<sup>24</sup>



2. **Equity and disability civil rights:** Transition failure is a systemic equity deficit, particularly for students with disabilities in underserved districts.<sup>25</sup>
3. **Federal accountability and legal exposure:** Failure to strengthen transition services exposes districts to compliance violations and outcome-based accountability consequences under IDEA monitoring systems.<sup>26</sup>

Inaction continues to produce national-scale disparities affecting millions of students and undermining federal objectives for inclusive education, equitable outcomes, and postsecondary success.

## 7. Conclusion

Designing, evaluating, and scaling inclusive transition-focused curriculum frameworks is not optional reform—it is a national necessity. By treating transition programming as a district-level instructional coordination initiative, schools can deliver structured, scalable systems that integrate academic rigor, disability inclusion, work-based learning, and interagency partnerships into a single, measurable pathway.

This paper concludes that a coordinated instructional framework can substantially improve postsecondary readiness and workforce integration outcomes for students with disabilities in underserved districts and directly advance national objectives embedded in IDEA, WIOA, and current federal education policy.

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## About the Author



Dr. Peter Jay Ibarita is an education professional specializing in inclusive special education systems, curriculum coordination, and transition-focused programming for adolescents with disabilities. He holds a Doctorate in Development Education in Special Education and advanced graduate training in moderate-to-severe disabilities, early childhood education, autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual disability. His professional experience spans special education practice at the elementary and secondary levels, with a particular emphasis on designing instructional supports to improve postsecondary and workforce readiness and equitable access to rigorous learning environments for students with disabilities in underserved school settings. Dr. Ibarita's work centers on scalable, evidence-informed solutions that strengthen inclusive instructional delivery and long-term outcomes for transition-age youth.

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