



Scaling Disability-Inclusive Transition-to-Employment Pathways for Students with Disabilities in Underserved U.S. School Districts

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Abstract

Across the United States, students with disabilities continue to experience disproportionately poor postsecondary outcomes, particularly in employment and economic self-sufficiency. Despite federal mandates under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), many underserved school districts lack the capacity, coordination, and infrastructure to deliver effective transition-to-employment services. National data consistently demonstrate that youth with disabilities, especially those from low-income and rural communities, face lower employment rates, limited access to work-based learning, and abrupt loss of supports upon exiting high school.¹

This white paper presents a scalable, disability-inclusive framework for strengthening transition-to-employment pathways in underserved U.S. school districts. Grounded in evidence-based practices and practitioner expertise, the proposed model integrates IEP-aligned transition planning, behavioral and instructional supports, family and community collaboration, employer partnerships with job coaching, and outcome-driven progress monitoring. The paper argues that improving transition systems is a matter of national urgency with broad economic, workforce, and equity implications. It concludes with a call to action urging coordinated investment and cross-sector collaboration to ensure students with disabilities are prepared to participate meaningfully in the U.S. workforce.

I. Introduction: National Importance and Urgency

More than seven million students, approximately 15 percent of all public school children, receive special education services in the United States.² IDEA establishes a clear national mandate: students with disabilities must be prepared for further education, employment, and independent living.³ Transition planning is therefore not optional; it is a federally required component of educational equity and workforce readiness.

Yet outcomes remain deeply inequitable. Only about one in five working-age adults with disabilities is employed, compared to nearly two-thirds of adults without disabilities.⁴ Youth with disabilities are significantly less likely to enroll in postsecondary education, complete credentials, or obtain competitive employment after high school.⁵ These disparities are most



pronounced in underserved districts—those affected by poverty, geographic isolation, staffing shortages, and limited access to adult services.

The urgency of this issue extends beyond individual students. Workforce shortages across multiple sectors, rising public assistance costs, and widening socioeconomic inequality underscore the national importance of expanding employment pipelines for people with disabilities. When students with disabilities are not supported to transition successfully, communities lose talent, families face lifelong economic strain, and public systems absorb preventable long-term costs.

Improving transition-to-employment systems is therefore a matter of national workforce development, educational equity, and economic sustainability.

II. Systemic Barriers in Underserved Districts

A. Persistent Outcome Gaps

(Related to OSEP Indicators 13 and 14)

Despite near-universal compliance with IDEA's procedural transition planning requirements as measured under **OSEP Indicator 13**, the quality and effectiveness of transition planning vary widely across districts. Indicator 13 focuses on whether required transition components are present in the IEP; however, it does not assess whether those components are instructionally relevant or aligned with postsecondary outcomes. As a result, high compliance rates often coexist with weak post-school results under **Indicator 14**, which measures actual employment and postsecondary education outcomes one year after exit.

Research indicates that while transition plans are present in most IEPs, they frequently lack meaningful alignment with postsecondary employment goals.⁶ In one national analysis, fewer than 10 percent of transition plans explicitly addressed workplace accommodations, job-specific supports, or employment-related services.⁷ This gap is reflected in district-level Indicator 14 data, where many districts report that fewer than half of former students with disabilities are competitively employed or enrolled in postsecondary education within one year of leaving school.

In practice, districts with strong Indicator 13 compliance but weak Indicator 14 outcomes often demonstrate transition plans that are procedurally complete yet functionally disconnected from instruction, career exploration, or community-based experiences. This disconnect illustrates the limitations of compliance-focused monitoring and highlights the need to evaluate transition quality through outcome-oriented measures.

B. Resource and Staffing Inequities

(Related to OSEP Indicators 13 and 14)



Underserved districts face chronic shortages of special education teachers, transition coordinators, and related service providers, conditions that directly affect their ability to implement high-quality transition services.⁸ While districts may technically meet Indicator 13 requirements by documenting transition plans, staffing constraints limit the implementation of transition services necessary to influence Indicator 14 outcomes.

District-level monitoring reports frequently show that high-poverty and rural districts rely on special education teachers to manage transition planning alongside their full instructional caseloads, with limited access to dedicated transition staff or job developers. In such contexts, districts may be unable to provide community-based instruction, job coaching, or sustained employer engagement services, all of which are strongly correlated with positive post-school outcomes.

As a result, Indicator 14 data from under-resourced districts often show lower employment and postsecondary participation rates than the statewide averages. These disparities suggest that staffing and capacity limitations undermine districts' ability to translate compliant plans into effective transition programming, reinforcing inequities across geographic and socioeconomic lines.

C. Fragmentation of Adult Services

(Related primarily to OSEP Indicator 14)

Effective transition planning requires coordinated engagement among schools, vocational rehabilitation agencies, workforce development systems, and community service providers. However, **Indicator 14 outcome data consistently reveal service discontinuities** following school exit, particularly in districts where interagency coordination begins late or is inconsistently implemented.

Students often encounter waitlists, eligibility barriers, and service gaps after leaving school, especially when formal connections to adult agencies are not established prior to exit.⁹ District-level analyses of Indicator 14 frequently show that students who are not connected to vocational rehabilitation or workforce programs before graduation are significantly less likely to be employed or enrolled in education one year later.

In underserved districts, fragmentation is compounded by geographic distance, limited transportation infrastructure, and reduced agency presence. Monitoring reviews commonly identify the absence of documented interagency collaboration as a contributing factor to weak post-school outcomes, even when transition plans meet Indicator 13 procedural standards.

D. Low Expectations and Limited Exposure

(Related to OSEP Indicator 14)

Students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual, developmental, or behavioral disabilities, are often excluded from rigorous career exploration and work-based learning opportunities. This exclusion directly affects Indicator 14 outcomes, as research consistently



demonstrates that **paid employment during high school is one of the strongest predictors of postsecondary employment success.**¹⁰

District-level data frequently show that students with disabilities in underserved districts participate in work-based learning at significantly lower rates than their peers in more resourced settings. In many cases, transition programming emphasizes supervision or classroom-based activities rather than authentic workplace exposure, limiting students' ability to develop job skills and professional competencies.

Indicator 14 outcome patterns suggest that districts offering structured, early work experiences report higher rates of competitive employment after exit, while districts lacking such opportunities show persistently low employment outcomes. These trends underscore the role of expectations and access not disability alone in shaping postsecondary success.

Synthesis Across Indicators

Taken together, these systemic barriers demonstrate that **OSEP Indicators 13 and 14 must be understood as interdependent measures rather than isolated compliance metrics.** High Indicator 13 performance without corresponding Indicator 14 gains signals a need to examine transition quality, implementation capacity, and equity in access to services. Addressing these barriers requires coordinated reforms that align planning, instruction, staffing, and interagency collaboration with measurable post-school outcomes.

III. A Scalable Transition-to-Employment Framework

To address the systemic barriers faced by students with disabilities in underserved school districts, this white paper proposes a scalable, district-level transition-to-employment framework that can operate across varied resource environments. The framework emphasizes integration rather than expansion, embedding transition planning within existing instructional, behavioral, and community systems to ensure feasibility, sustainability, and fidelity to IDEA requirements. Each component reinforces the others, creating a cohesive structure that supports measurable postsecondary success.

1. IEP-Aligned Transition Planning

IDEA requires that transition planning begin no later than age 16 and include measurable postsecondary goals and coordinated transition services.¹¹ While compliance with this requirement is widespread, high-quality implementation demands that transition planning function as an ongoing, developmentally responsive process rather than a static documentation exercise.

Effective IEP-aligned transition planning centers on:

- Student- and family-centered goal setting, ensuring postsecondary goals reflect individual strengths, interests, and preferences



- Age-appropriate transition assessments that meaningfully inform goal development and service selection
- Alignment between postsecondary goals, coursework, and annual IEP objectives, linking daily instruction to long-term outcomes
- Explicit planning for employment-related supports and accommodations, including assistive technology, job coaching, and workplace modifications

When transition planning is revisited annually with intentional alignment between instruction and outcomes, students experience greater continuity across educational settings and are better prepared to navigate postsecondary expectations. In this context, the IEP serves as a strategic roadmap guiding skill development, service delivery, and interagency coordination.

2. Behavioral and Instructional Supports

Many students with disabilities require structured behavioral and instructional supports to develop the competencies necessary for success in employment and post-secondary environments. Transition planning that fails to address behavioral regulation, communication, and adaptive functioning often leaves students underprepared for the demands of adult roles.

This framework emphasizes the integration of:

- **Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs)** grounded in functional behavioral assessments, which support the development of self-regulation, workplace-appropriate behavior, communication, and problem-solving skills essential for employment success.¹²
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles, which ensure instruction is flexible, accessible, and responsive to diverse cognitive, sensory, and language needs, reducing barriers to participation and promoting independence.¹³

Embedding behavioral and instructional supports throughout secondary education ensures that transition goals are reinforced consistently across academic, vocational, and community-based contexts. This integrated approach prepares students to function effectively in less-structured postsecondary environments where supports may be reduced, and self-management becomes increasingly critical.

3. Family and Community Collaboration

Family engagement is a well-documented predictor of positive postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.¹⁴ Effective transition systems recognize families as essential partners and provide them with the knowledge and tools necessary to support their children's transition into adulthood.

High-quality transition frameworks offer families:

- Training on adult services, eligibility processes, and employment pathways
- Opportunities to participate meaningfully in transition planning and decision-making
- Clear, consistent, and culturally responsive communication



Beyond the family unit, collaboration with community partners, including vocational rehabilitation agencies, nonprofit organizations, community colleges, workforce development entities, and disability advocacy groups, extends the reach of school-based services. These partnerships help reduce service discontinuity, facilitate early referrals, and ensure continuity of support following school exit.

4. Employer Partnerships and Job Coaching

Work-based learning is a central element of effective transition programming and a critical predictor of postsecondary employment outcomes. Authentic exposure to work environments enables students to develop job-specific skills, professional behaviors, and confidence prior to exit.

This framework prioritizes:

- **Partnerships with local employers** to provide job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment opportunities in competitive, integrated settings
- **Job coaching services** that support students in learning job tasks, navigating workplace culture, and gradually fading supports as independence increases.¹⁵

Employer partnerships also serve a broader workforce development function by educating businesses about inclusive hiring practices and expanding local capacity to employ individuals with disabilities. When structured effectively, these partnerships benefit students, employers, and communities alike.

5. Progress Monitoring and Outcome Measurement

Accountability is essential to the sustainability and effectiveness of transition programming. Districts must move beyond compliance-based reporting and adopt data-driven decision-making practices that support continuous improvement.

This component includes:

- Student-level progress monitoring, tracking advancement toward IEP goals, acquisition of employment-related skills, and increasing independence
- Program-level outcome analysis, using post-school outcome data, including federal Indicator 14 metrics, to assess employment and postsecondary education participation after exit.¹⁶

Regular review of outcome data enables districts to identify gaps, refine practices, justify funding investments, and scale effective transition strategies. When data are disaggregated and used proactively, they become a powerful tool for advancing equity and improving long-term outcomes.

Framework Scalability and Adaptability



The Transition-to-Employment Framework is designed for incremental implementation, allowing districts to strengthen individual components over time while maintaining compliance with IDEA requirements. By emphasizing integration, collaboration, and continuous improvement, the framework can be adapted to urban, rural, and high-poverty contexts without imposing unsustainable operational burdens.

By systematically applying these five components, districts can move beyond procedural compliance toward measurable, equitable postsecondary success for students with disabilities.

IV. Scalability in Underserved Contexts

For transition systems to produce equitable postsecondary outcomes, they must be able to scale across districts with vastly different resource levels, geographic conditions, and staffing capacities. The Transition-to-Employment Framework proposed in this paper is intentionally designed for adaptability, allowing districts to implement core components incrementally while maintaining fidelity to IDEA requirements and alignment with federal accountability expectations.

Integration with Existing Systems and Initiatives

One of the most effective strategies for scalability is integrating transition services into existing Career and Technical Education (CTE) and workforce development initiatives. Many districts already operate CTE programs, work-study courses, or school-to-work pipelines that can be expanded to include students with disabilities through inclusive design and targeted supports. Embedding transition services within these established structures reduces duplication, maximizes existing funding streams, and normalizes students with disabilities' participation in career preparation activities.

By aligning transition planning with CTE coursework and credential pathways, districts can create clearer linkages between IEP goals and workforce outcomes while reducing the need for standalone programs that may be difficult to sustain in under-resourced environments.

Regional Collaboration and Resource Sharing

Underserved districts, particularly rural or small districts, often lack the scale to sustain specialized transition personnel or employer networks independently. Regional collaboratives offer a practical solution by enabling districts to share transition coordinators, job developers, and employer partnerships. Through inter-district agreements or education service agencies, districts can pool resources to support community-based instruction, job coaching, and interagency coordination.

Regional collaboration also facilitates the development of broader employer networks and increases access to diverse work-based learning opportunities that may not exist within a single district's geographic boundaries. This approach enhances efficiency while expanding opportunities for students.



Use of Virtual and Hybrid Platforms

Geographic isolation, transportation limitations, and staffing shortages often limit access to transition services in underserved areas. Virtual and hybrid platforms can mitigate these barriers by expanding access to career exploration, employer engagement, and interagency collaboration. Virtual job shadowing, online career readiness training, remote employer presentations, and virtual interagency meetings enable districts to connect students with opportunities and services that would otherwise be inaccessible.

When used strategically, virtual tools supplement, not replace, in-person experiences, allowing districts to scale transition supports without incurring significant infrastructure or transportation costs. This flexibility is particularly valuable for rural districts and communities with limited access to adult service providers.

Leveraging Interagency Funding and Braided Resources

Scalability also depends on districts' ability to leverage interagency funding streams to support transition services. IDEA funds, vocational rehabilitation resources, workforce development grants, and state or local employment initiatives can be braided to support shared goals. Coordinated funding allows districts to expand job coaching, employer partnerships, and postsecondary transition supports without relying on a single funding source.

Formal agreements with vocational rehabilitation agencies and workforce boards can clarify roles, responsibilities, and funding contributions, ensuring continuity of services before and after school exit. Such coordination strengthens sustainability and reduces service fragmentation.

Impact of Modest Strategic Investments

Importantly, scalability does not require large-scale restructuring or substantial new funding. Even modest, targeted investments such as training paraprofessionals to serve as job coaches, designating transition liaisons within existing staff roles, or establishing employer advisory groups—can yield measurable improvements in postsecondary outcomes. These investments enhance capacity, improve service coordination, and expand access to work-based learning without imposing excessive financial burdens.

By emphasizing integration, collaboration, and strategic resource use, this model enables districts to scale transition services effectively and equitably. Adaptability ensures that underserved communities are not excluded from implementation and that all students with disabilities have access to meaningful transition-to-employment pathways regardless of district capacity.



V. Call to Action

Improving transition-to-employment outcomes for students with disabilities is not a peripheral issue, it is a national imperative.

School districts must prioritize transition planning as a core educational outcome. **Policymakers** must ensure IDEA and vocational rehabilitation systems are fully funded and aligned.

Nonprofits and foundations should invest in scalable transition initiatives in high-need communities.

Employers must recognize students with disabilities as a vital and capable segment of the future workforce.

When systems align, students with disabilities can and do succeed. Scaling inclusive transition pathways strengthens communities, reduces long-term dependency, and advances national equity and workforce resilience.

About the Author



Kaye Gwyn Lanuzo-Llanto is a U.S. and Philippines-licensed Special Education and Learning Behavior Specialist with more than a decade of professional experience supporting students with disabilities across diverse educational settings in the United States and the Philippines. She currently serves as a Diverse Learner Teacher in Illinois, where she provides individualized, data-driven instruction for students in low-incidence and structured teaching programs, leads IEP development and compliance, and implements behavior intervention plans aligned with inclusive instructional practices. Previously, she served as a Transition Program Coordinator and job coach for adolescents and young adults with disabilities, designing and implementing vocational skills training and community-based employment pathways in resource-limited environments. Her professional expertise spans IEP-aligned transition planning, Universal Design for Learning, behavioral supports, paraprofessional training, and family community collaboration. Through her work, Ms. Llanto brings a practitioner-informed, systems-level perspective to advancing equitable transition-to-employment pathways for students with disabilities in underserved communities.

Endnotes

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