



Transition - The Impact on Students in Schools and Communities

After reading this brief, you should be able to,

- Describe two goals of transition services for autistic learners
- Detail some of the current barriers facing transition planning
- Describe three ways schools and communities can support transition

We have talked about meeting the needs of autistic community members in a variety of environments, and today we are going to talk about school. Specifically, the crucial part of an autistic person's life is called *transition*. Transition is the term schools use to describe the period when students begin to think about and plan for their life after high school. Transition services start at age 14, and in most public schools, continue until the student graduates or ages out of their programming at age 22.

During this time, schools, parents, therapists, educators, and students ideally work together to plan for the future. Amid the general turbulence of adolescence, student goals and coursework may change to target life skills as opposed to academic skills, possible vocational interests should be considered and explored, and appropriate post-secondary opportunities should be discussed. Students are encouraged to take more responsibility for themselves, and terms like *self-advocacy* and *self-determination* are often points of emphasis. But what do they really mean? Let's dive in and see what recent research tells us.

The definition of self-advocacy is often nuanced and can vary from one expert to the next. In general, an acceptable definition in most schools is self-advocacy is a person's ability to communicate their wants and needs. This encompasses any topic and any setting - the ability to

ask a cashier where the restroom is in a grocery store, the ability to tell a doctor what hurts, or the ability to ask for help when needed. Many autistic people have communication challenges, so it makes sense that self-advocacy, which is driven by communication skills, is a long-term work-in-progress.

A broader topic related to self-advocacy is self-determination, which is defined by a person's ability to set their own goals and work to meet them. A simple example of self-determination could be when a person decides to buy a new phone; they decide which phone to purchase, earn and save the money, and then spend the money on the phone when they are ready. Self-determination is often a goal educators, parents, and students strive toward during transition.

If we consider gains in self-advocacy and self-determination to be tenants of transition planning, or markers to success, they can also serve as measuring sticks to evaluate transition services. With that in mind, let's look at findings from a paper published by Wehman and colleagues in 2014 called, "Transition from School to Adulthood for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder: What We Know and What We Need to Know." The authors set out to review recommendations from literature related to transition and compile the results into actionable takeaways for schools. What the authors found when reviewing the current state of transition services is what many who have been through transition—either themselves or alongside a loved one— already know; it is common for "many [autistic students] to leave high school unprepared for adult life at work, in college, or in community living" despite access to years of transition planning in middle and high school. The authors cited that despite higher grade point averages than peers with other disabilities, autistic students are, more often than not, educated in special education settings and working on coursework that is drastically different than same aged peers. Students are frequently not taking part in meetings to determine their goals, and the amount of time they spend in community settings is minimal. The authors also reported

employment rates for autistic adults to be somewhere between 4%-11% which is a testament to many system failures, including transition planning.

Another article, published in 2013 by Carter and colleagues specifically explored self-determination among transition-aged high school students. They found that despite the value placed on self-determination by families, “in many schools an in-depth focus on self-determination has not penetrated the post-high school curriculum.” They pointed out that despite knowledge in the field and guidance from literature, schools are often not “draw[ing] on the best of what the field knows works.” Schools are not educating learners in the ways that support their self-advocacy and self-determination goals.

With transition outcomes as dire as they are currently, we need to step back and look at how ineffective transition services impact communities as a whole. According to Valerie Paradiz’ 2018 article, *Essential Self-Advocacy and Transition*, between 2018 –2028, over “500,000 autistic students are expected to exit high school into young adult life.” That is hundreds of thousands of people who are underprepared to enter young adulthood at alarming rates. Dismal transition planning outcomes contribute to autistic adults who are unable to access employment, and that means they are unable to earn a wage. Community members who are unable to earn wages are unable to participate fully in their communities because they don’t have money to spend at stores, they can’t afford to attend community events, and they rely on others or systems to support their needs like healthcare, access to food, and housing.

When autistic people aren’t able to participate in their communities, they face further social exclusion and isolation. This is harmful at the individual level and at the community level. Communities fractured by large groups of people who are excluded from community participation convey they don’t value the strengths of the excluded people. Consequently, large groups of people then struggle to see their own value and lose motivation to contribute and fulfill their true potential.

Now, let's pause for a minute because this is a lot of information that may be difficult to digest. We've scratched the surface enough to establish what isn't working for transition-aged students and communities, so let's switch gears and talk about what can work. What changes can schools and communities make to positively affect the lives of autistic students as they exit high school programs?

The first step for schools is to expand their definition of self-advocacy. To consider a person's ability to communicate their basic wants and needs sufficient for community living omits the other ways communication and sharing information with others enriches lives. Adult self-advocates quoted in a 2015 article by Ryan and Griffiths, called *Self-Advocacy and its Impacts for Adults with Developmental Disabilities*, stated their definition of self-advocacy was much broader. They defined self-advocacy as the ability to give their views, be listened to, make their own choices and mistakes, and improve their lives to be more independent.

Should this more holistic view of self-advocacy take root in schools, it will broaden the ways educators and school professionals write goals and evaluate students. Dismantling the idea that self-advocacy is only about wants and needs will create space for schools to ask questions like, "Can my students give their opinions to others? Can they tell me something they are passionate about? Do they know how to put their goals into words?"

The next steps for improving transition outcomes are related to direct instruction and curricula in schools. Referring back to the article by Wehman, the authors identified several best-practices for preparing autistic students for post-secondary life. They included priorities, such as educating autistic students in inclusive, natural environments as opposed to special education environments. This means that autistic students are included into classrooms and activities with a diverse group of their peers and are supported by teachers and school staff in ways that help them get their needs met within that diverse environment. Another identified best-practice is providing autistic students opportunities for concurrent employment and

academic engagement, so students can gain job-training services within the context of an actual work environment, while still also receiving needed academic, life-skill, and communication instruction in school.

A third takeaway from research is to prioritize enhancing self-determination and self-advocacy skills through meaningful, hands-on, explicit instruction and opportunity. This includes helping students learn about themselves—their strengths, preferences, likes, dislikes, needs, fears—and encouraging them to take action based on what they know about themselves. Students deserve opportunities to make choices for themselves and experience what it feels like to take associated risks. Independent decision-making and reasonable risk-taking are hallmarks of adulthood, and autistic students need practice to learn those skills, just like all adolescents.

Implementing these suggestions is a heavy lift for transition programs that currently do not adhere to similar practices, but the benefits are proven to make positive changes. Researchers in all the articles we have talked about today note transition programs that contain at least these three priorities contribute to improved self-concepts for autistic learners, increased leadership skills, and more favorable employment and community engagement outcomes.

To ease the burden on autistic people and transition programs under reform, communities can also make changes to the way they support the coming-of-age of autistic students. Transition programs need community partners who will open their venues and workplaces to autistic students who are still learning how to participate in community environments. This means welcoming students who experience social, behavioral, communication, and sensory challenges into environments they are often excluded from and doing so knowing that it will not always go smoothly.

Communities can also create spaces that anticipate the needs of autistic people by considering the sensory, communication, and social components of their environments. Venues and places of employment can implement small changes to alleviate stress, promote inclusivity, and convey to autistic people that they are not only welcome, but valued as community members with unique strengths, gifts, and perspectives.

As communities and schools each stretch and grow to adapt to the needs of autistic people in the most effective ways possible, they must remember to grow together, too. An approach that dovetails the needs of autistic people, with the goals of transition programs, and the inclusive initiatives of community partners is the approach that has the most potential to substantially improve outcomes for autistic students and their communities.

Want to know more?

Carter, E. W., Lane, K. L., Cooney, M., Weir, K., Moss, C. K., & Machalicek, W. (2013). Self-determination among transition-age youth with autism or intellectual disability: Parent perspectives. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 38(3), 129–138.

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Paradiz, V., Kelso, S., Nelson, A., Earl, A. (2018). Essential self-advocacy and transition. *Pediatrics* April 2018; 141 (Supplement_4): S373–S377. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-4300P>

Ryan, T. G., & Griffiths, S. (2015). Self-advocacy and its impacts for adults with developmental disabilities. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 55(1), 31-53.