

Begin the Vocational Journey with the End in Mind

Once school has ended for those with CdLS, a whole new set of adventures awaits. Whether it's volunteering at a local business, attending social events in the community or even working in a bakery, transitioning out of school and into the community can be a wonderful experience if vocational foundations are laid well. Molly, mother of Alex (pictured with his sister below), shares her experience in preparing Alex for this transition.

Transitioning from school age services to adulthood services is an excursion of potholes, bumps and smooth pavement, depending upon any given day, hour or minute.

The process for our son, Alex, who is now 21, began formally around the age of 14, as Pennsylvania law requires families and schools to begin addressing transition age goals in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) at this age. Those goals must address employment, independent living, and post-secondary goals.

Truthfully, we have been planning for a “life” all along. Alex’s educational services could be described as a modified curriculum, based on life skills, with participation in the general education classroom. These services always allowed him to address as many functional skills as possible in real-life settings, while at the same time permitting interaction with non-disabled peers.

The journey truly began with the end in mind. We have used tools and strategies that helped us dream for our son, from a very young age, and put into words the vision our family has for his future. It allowed us to look at the possibilities, not his disability. We planned, adjusted, and planned again and again. Each change included written documentation of the vision developed by the people who have known and loved him best.

It is important to remember that despite his successes and accomplishments beyond high school, Alex requires one-on-one support to complete his tasks. Despite the level of support required, community inclusion is obtainable.

We continue to surround our family with good people who support our vision. We have chosen paths at times that required some “trailblazing” because they were less traveled. The process over time has included the following:

1. Continuous planning for a future that includes work, recreation and socialization in the community as a driving force, and never losing



sight of that end. We would revisit the dream many times throughout Alex's school years through Person Centered Planning, Making Action Plans (MAPS) and Planning Alternative Tomorrow's with Hope (PATH) and monthly collaboration meetings from sixth grade through graduation. "A person centered plan can help those involved with the focus person see the total person, recognize his or her desires and interests, and discover completely new ways of thinking about the future of the person."¹

2. Collaborative team members are necessary and these members have included people who respect our vision or share our vision, including: parents, special education teachers, general education teachers, occupational therapy, physical therapy, Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI), speech therapist, hearing consultant, deaf-blind consultant, and local education agency representatives. When the timing was right, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Bureau of Blind and Visual Services representatives were invited to join the team. Our school district also hired a vocational consultant to join the team during Alex's last two years in the school system.
3. Vocational exploration was derived from what interests and motivates Alex. It was important that the vocational goals extended from these interests and were then embedded as functional goals within his IEP. Any skill practiced in real life settings of the school building were mimicked in the community. For example, working in the school library scanning the returned books and straightening the shelves led to a volunteer position in one of our local libraries doing similar activities.
1. Delivering teacher supplies on a pushed cart led to a position at a local nursing home delivering mail from a pushed cart. Folding towels in the consumer science class carried over to folding towels at the YMCA, with the added bonus of recreational swimming afterward. Quality Vocational Assessments should be conducted. Alex had three vocational assessments completed by three separate agencies during his middle/high school years.
4. Monitoring progress through a formal transition checklist. This can be obtained through your Department of Education or other organizations such as your Regional Deaf-Blind Project (if the student qualifies) or perhaps a parent training and information center. Documentation of the transition process and progress is very helpful to be certain that steps for a smooth transition are not forgotten.



Examples of success:

- Alex owns his own vending machine, and he purchases items, stocks soda and snacks, and banks.
- He volunteers at a nursing home delivering mail twice a week and removing activity calendars monthly. He is working toward more days which could lead to paid employment.
- He volunteers at the YMCA folding towels. He has his own membership and swims.
- Alex volunteers at a local library where he straightens shelves and chairs and checking in books.
- He bakes dog treats at a local dog grooming business. He purchases ingredients, then mixes, bakes and packages the items.
- Alex delivers shredded paper to a local farmer for animal bedding and then enjoys the atmosphere of the farm.

Never stop dreaming! The next step for Alex is a home of his own, and we have always included this dream in the transition plan too. To sum it up, the work may be in the details, but the proof is in a happy young man, with jobs to do, people to meet and places to go.

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¹Mount, Beth, and Kay Zwernik. *It's Never Too Early, It's Never Too Late: A Booklet about Personal Futures Planning for Persons with Developmental Disabilities, Their Families and Friends, Case Managers, Service Providers and Advocates.* St. Paul, MN: Metropolitan Council, 1988. Print

