

Findings and Recommendations for Transition Process for Students with Disabilities Regarding Records and Services at the Age of Majority

Finding 1:

Many families are not aware that once a student with a disability turns 18 years old, that student's special education service records may not be shared with the parents and will not be transferred to a local Community Services Board for continued services. The 18 year old student is the only one who can legally gain access to these records, unless an agreement designates another person to have access. Continuing after a student transitions, and in order to build on previous progress made, future service providers often need to access relevant parts of the whole record to continue to meet the needs of the adult with different abilities.

The Virginia Department of Education has detailed guidance document on working with students during transition, "Transfer of Rights for Students with Disabilities Upon Reaching the Age of Majority in Virginia." The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services does not currently have such guidance.

Recommendation 1: Require that the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, in coordination with the Department of Education, develop and disseminate best practice standards to Community Services Boards (CSBs) and local education agencies about how to work with local education agencies, students, and families through the transition process. Additionally, best practices should include information about what special education, service, or accommodation records to transfer at the age of majority and/or high school completion. The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services shall use existing Department of Education Guidance in developing best practices.

Finding 2:

Information on the transition process and opportunities available for students with disabilities for their families and professionals alike is overwhelming and confusing. There are similar services available from different organizations with slight variations in delivery and practice. Families and students may not be able to find the information they need to make a fully informed decision to meet the future needs of the adult student. Early on in the planning process, (late middle school or early high school) more awareness is needed by classroom teachers, counselors, and special education teachers on the work-world need for a specific type of diploma for various colleges and careers, and/or knowledge of the state and local resources available beyond high school, in order to relay this information to students and families.

Recommendation 2: Introduce a budget amendment directing the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services to work with the Department of Education, the Department of

Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), Virginia Commonwealth University's Partnership for People with Disabilities, and Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) to ensure that online resources are readily available and disseminated to all individuals of transition age and their families. This includes utilization and promotion of PEATC's online training course, Transition University (TU) conducted in coordination with VDOE and PEATC's online transition guide and resource documents on its website.

DARS, DOE, DBHDS, PEATC, Partnership for People with Disabilities, and CTI shall explore whether these online resources should be expanded to ensure full coverage of resources for students with disabilities on transition services beyond high school, including, transfer requirements, provider and service options, diploma requirements for future career or educational goals, and other helpful information. Assess whether PEATC's online resources, including Transition University and PEATC's transition webpage should serve as the central hub or a separate website should be developed with the goal of ensuring access to families and promotion of resources and information by DARS and DBHDS without duplicating existing efforts. Review transition resources on other organizational websites including, but not limited to, Partnership for People with Disabilities.

Recommendation 3: Request that the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services work with the Virginia Commonwealth University's Partnership for People with Disabilities, and the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), to develop and disseminate virtual training on transition resources and services for teachers in each high school or school district.

Finding 3:

Students with disabilities are often unintentionally excluded from participating in vocational rehabilitation (VR) or internship programs because of the lack of knowledge about needed adjustments or accommodations, or the high degree of liability for a particular job. This is a potential barrier to employment. Virtual reality software would allow students with disabilities to explore a wider variety of career options. The Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) policies regarding the use of virtual reality technology do not allow for its use in the vocational rehabilitation setting.

Currently, the Virginia Department of Education uses state funds to provide virtual job shadowing and AZTEC software, for industry credentialing. These funds are used specifically for students with autism.

Recommendation 4: Request the Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) work with agencies who provide services and workplace opportunities to students with disabilities, to identify solutions to barriers in using virtual reality software and other relevant transition content applications for students with disabilities.

Finding 4:

Local businesses with internship programs are hesitant to work with students with disabilities. Employers are not knowledgeable about how to accommodate or manage these young students who may have different strengths and challenges. Additionally, employers are not aware of local resources or available tools that would help a transitioning student to be successful in the job. Programs such as Project Search and Start on Success have an 80% employment success rate, and they should be used as role models for schools that do not have internship programs for students with disabilities.

Recommendation 5: Request that the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) continue to develop internship opportunities for students with disabilities. DARS should work in collaboration with other state agencies and local governments including, but not limited to, the Virginia Departments of Labor and Industry, Education (Career and Technical Education, as well as Special Education), the Blind and Vision Impaired, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, as well as the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, local chambers of commerce, businesses and other relevant organizations to provide internship opportunities for students with disabilities. These opportunities will ensure that each student with a disability has a blueprint for their career and job placement after high school. DARS shall continue to educate internship provider businesses about different types of accommodations that can be accessed for various disabilities. DARS shall take advantage of established programs and increase statewide school participation in programs such as Project Search and other post high school programs.

Recommendation 6: Request that the Secretary of Education, in coordination with the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Secretary of Labor, and Secretary of Commerce and Trade, investigate the feasibility of developing a comprehensive program to reduce unemployment among adults with disabilities by assisting and supporting businesses to attract, hire, train, and retain adults with disabilities.

Finding 5:

Funding is needed to assist with the transition of students with disabilities to their highest level of independent living. Schools do not have enough transition coordinators to assist students who are moving out of the school system to find needed services for independent living.

Transition Coordinators work closely with state agencies, service providers, and case managers to bridge the gap for students and families between the high level of services provided to students in secondary school and the services available after aging out of high school. This gap is often referred to as “the cliff.”

Recommendation 7: Introduce a budget amendment to fund a transition coordinator grant program to be administered through the Virginia Department of Education. These

coordinators shall be employed by local school divisions and work with other community partners (local Community Services Boards and other agencies) to assist students with disabilities and their families in preparing for future service needs and employment opportunities. School districts shall apply to the Department of Education to receive state grant funding for a coordinator position. Grant funding may also be used by local school divisions to offer transition services to students with disabilities through contracted positions, such as job coaches, that are available in the community.

Recommendation 8: Require that all public high schools identify the person responsible for transition planning and coordination at each school. Make such identification of the person responsible for transition planning available to the public.

Recommendation 9: Support the Virginia Department of Education in their use of IDEA funding to develop a state special education transition management position to oversee transition coordinator issues and funding across the state.

Finding 6:

The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities serves as the Developmental Disabilities (DD) Council for Virginia and works to help people with developmental disabilities meet their service needs for independence in a respectful and dignified manner. The Virginia Commonwealth University's Partnership for People with Disabilities offers education, health, early childhood, and community living training programs for both providers and people with disabilities themselves. The disAbility Law Center works with individuals in the community to address abuse, neglect, and discrimination of people with disabilities by providing legal services with grant funds. These DD council organizations do not have the staff to directly manage the transition process but are aligned with assisting in this effort and have the expertise to provide guidance for professionals, as well as student and family education and awareness. These organizations serve a strategic role in assisting students with disabilities, their families and professionals to help with the transition from high school to independent living and self-sufficiency. Grant funds are used to support their services.

Recommendation 10: Request that the Chair of the Virginia Commission on Youth write letters of endorsement for Virginia Commonwealth University's Partnership for People with Disabilities, the disAbility Law Center, the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, and the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services. The letters will show support for these organizations towards their goal of obtaining grant funding to assist with the advocacy for, and the transition of, students with disabilities to adulthood and independent living.

Finding 7:

Services provided by a given organization are not necessarily known across agencies and providers. There is a strong need for better collaboration of services to assist transitioning students with disabilities to adulthood. This lack of organization encourages duplication, poor communication with families, and unused services and benefits for individuals. The Virginia Intercommunity Transition Council, under the Virginia Department of Education, convenes many of the organizations with the goal of promoting successful transition outcomes for youth by providing leadership and innovation in employment, education, and community support systems. The role of this organization could be more widely felt.

In addition, in 2020, the Joint Legislative and Audit Commission (JLARC) recommended that the Virginia Department of Education develop a robust statewide plan for improving transition planning for students with disabilities. JLARC's report raised this as an issue of oversight that the Department could address. The Department of Education is currently developing a statewide plan and will provide its report by December 1, 2022.

Recommendation 11: Introduce a language only budget amendment directing the Virginia Department of Education to have the Virginia Intercommunity Transition Council meet at least biannually to help implement its statewide plan for oversight of local practices related to transition planning and services.

The objective of this council shall include streamlining and collaboration, developing a better transition communication network in the Commonwealth, educating all members about what Virginia and local organizations provide for students transitioning to adulthood, identifying any gaps or overlap in services for potential streamlining and problem-solving, and developing an improved transition infrastructure for students with different abilities.

This council shall include, but not be limited to, the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Department of Social Services, Virginia Community College System, and Virginia Commonwealth University's Partnership for People with Disabilities.

Additional Finding:

The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities published a number of recommendations in their *2022 Assessment of Access to Information for People with Disabilities and their Family Members*. A couple of their recommendations addressed school to adult transition.

Request that the Chair of the Virginia Commission on Youth write a letter of support to the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities for the following recommendations, as amended below in **bold**:

Recommendation: Virginia Department of Education (DOE) **and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services**, along with the local school divisions, should work with CSBs/BHA within the school division's catchment area to designate a staff to act as a lead for school-to-adult life transition and work with the school division's Transition Coordinator to ensure accurate and timely information is distributed to families. CSBs/BHA should utilize existing school-to-adult life transition resources such as PEATC's Transition University for CSB staff training and development.

Recommendation: The CSBs/BHA, through their member organization, Virginia Associations of Community Services Boards (VACSB), should consider operating a Community of Practice for School to Adult Transition, to foster learning and identify some of the exemplary practices taking place in several CSBs.