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The Voice and Vision of Special Education

Council for Exceptional Children
The voice and vision of special education

Cover photo description: The cover photo is of a person, and a small child walk hand in hand across a narrow suspension bridge made of wooden planks and metal cables. Thick fog surrounds the bridge, partially obscuring a forest of evergreen trees and the far end of the span.

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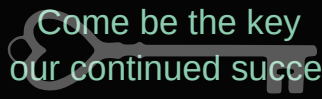
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Message from the Guest Editor Building Bridges

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A Special Issue on Lifelong Transition for Learners with Visual Disabilities

I frequently begin new topics in my university courses by reminding students that understanding the meaning of words helps us understand concepts. When we know where a word comes from by identifying the root, and learning what common prefixes or suffixes mean, we are better able to recognize words and their applications. Etymology provides a framework for understanding, even when

we encounter unfamiliar ideas or contexts. The word *transition* comes from the Latin *transire*, meaning "to go across" or "to pass over." Merriam-Webster (2026) defines transition as "a passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another." At its core, transition involves movement, change, and adaptation.

The importance of transition is reflected in the pages of publications such as Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) *TEACHING Exceptional Children* (TEC). Over the past decade and a half, the journal has published hundreds of articles addressing transition-related topics, including self-determination, employment, inclusive education, family partnerships, independent living, community participation, and postsecondary success. More recently, authors have examined topics such as preparing students with disabilities for successful transitions to college (Hamblet et al., 2026) and the collaborative supports required to improve outcomes for students who are deafblind (Schles et al., 2026). Yet comparatively few articles have centered the transition experiences of students who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind, or have multiple disabilities alongside a visual impairment.

This gap is particularly noteworthy given the complexity of the population served by vision professionals. Research by Rachel Schles has demonstrated that states serve approximately 3.5 to 4 times more students with visual disabilities than are reflected in federal child-count data because many students qualify for special

education services under another disability category (Schles, 2020). Within the field, we know that visual disabilities frequently coexist with autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, extensive support needs, complex communication systems, and significant health conditions. Many of these students are therefore identified and served under a primary disability category other than visual impairment. These intersecting identities create instructional, service-delivery, and transition-planning needs that rarely fit within a single professional silo and often require extensive collaboration among educators, related-service providers, families, and community partners (Schles et al., 2026).

The complexity of service needs occurs alongside persistent personnel shortages within the field. For students with visual impairments and additional disabilities, supporting meaningful educational and transition outcomes often requires substantial consultation, assessment, collaboration, travel, material preparation, family support, and interagency coordination. Yet traditional caseload figures frequently fail to capture these responsibilities. As a result, workload concerns continue to be recognized as a significant challenge within the field, raising important questions about how students with the most complex needs will access the individualized supports required for successful transitions across the lifespan (Ericson et al., 2024).

Within special education, however, transition is often reduced to a specific legal requirement associated with adolescence, employment, and life after high school. While these secondary transition services are critically important, they represent only one chapter in a much larger story. The articles in this special issue remind us that transition is not a single event or isolated educational process. It is a lifelong process of moving from one stage of life to another, acquiring new skills, adapting to new expectations, and negotiating changing environments, relationships, and identities. From a family's first encounter with disabilities in infancy to adults navigating employment, postsecondary education, changing life circumstances, and evolving support needs, transition is constantly unfolding.

Together, the authors represent a range of perspectives spanning early intervention, school-age services, orientation and mobility, assistive technology, vocational rehabilitation, and adult outcomes. As Guest Editor, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to curate this special issue and especially thankful to the authors who contributed their expertise, experiences, and perspectives. Collectively, their work challenges us to broaden our understanding of transition and to recognize the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) as a framework that supports meaningful participation, self-determination, and lifelong learning across the lifespan.

Two of the contributions focus on the earliest years of development, when both children and families are navigating profound transitions. *Relationships and transitions: The ECC as a bridge from early intervention to preschool* highlights the importance of relationships, reflective practice, family-centered intervention, and everyday routines in supporting growth from infancy onward. Complementing this perspective, *Acting, not being acted upon: Cultivating agency in early learners who are blind with complex needs* emphasizes the development of agency through choice-making, participation, communication, and self-determination. Together, these articles remind us that transition begins long before formal planning processes emerge and is rooted in relationships, experiences, and opportunities to influence one's environment.

The middle years receive special attention as a critical developmental period. *When school gets bigger: Teaching for meaningful participation through the expanded core curriculum in grades 4-6* examines how students move from supported access toward increasing responsibility, participation, and self-direction as educational environments become more complex. Building on this progression, *Transition at every step: Building independence through O&M from preschool onward* demonstrates how orientation and mobility supports transitions across developmental stages by fostering exploration, environmental understanding, problem-solving, and self-determination.

Several articles focus on preparing students for adulthood through authentic learning experiences and meaningful participation. *Integrating competency-based education and the expanded core curriculum for students with visual disabilities* argues that transition planning should move beyond compliance toward the development and demonstration of transferable competencies. Complementing this perspective, three articles: *Integrating expanded core curriculum skills in authentic contexts; Students as leaders: Strategies for student-driven transition planning;* and *Preparing for the future: The value of vocational rehabilitation services and the importance of early connection* emphasize authentic experiences, student leadership, community engagement, and collaboration with adult-service systems.

Finally, two articles consider how support can extend beyond traditional educational boundaries. *New tools, new heights: Transforming the transition journey with artificial intelligence* explores the potential of emerging technologies to support access, self-advocacy, career exploration, and independent decision-making. *Supporting lifespan transition: Practical tools from diagnosis to employment* highlights how resources from APH and ConnectCenter can reinforce instruction, support families, and promote continuity across major life transitions. Together, these articles remind us that effective transition planning depends not only on instruction, but also on access to tools, resources, and supports that follow learners across environments and throughout life.

Collectively, these contributions challenge us to rethink transition not as a compliance obligation or destination but as a developmental process that unfolds across the lifespan. Whether supporting a parent receiving a diagnosis, a child developing agency, a middle school student assuming greater responsibility, a young adult preparing for employment, or an adult adapting to changing circumstances, transition remains fundamentally about helping individuals move successfully from one stage of life to the next. Understanding transition in this broader sense reminds us that our role as educators is not simply to prepare students for graduation, but to help them navigate a lifetime of change, opportunity, and growth.

I would like to acknowledge that the land on which editing of this edition was completed is the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and occupied territory of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) People.

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President's Message

Beth A. Jones,

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As the year ends, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all you have done to help us accomplish our mission "to improve the lives of children, students, and/or consumers with visual impairments and/or deafblindness. Specifically, we aim to advance the education of individuals with visual impairments and deafblindness." I would like to recap some of DVIDB's accomplishments from the past year.

We had a very successful Preconference Webinar and Council for Exceptional Children conference in Salt Lake City in March. DVIDB had over 20

presentations and posters from leaders in our field. Our preconference featured Dr. Donna Clemens and Dr. Belinda Rudinger who presented on AI for Practitioners and Dr. Tiffany Wild who spoke about Accessible Science Education.

Additionally, we had a fabulous social event at Convention where we got to honor our awardees that were in attendance. Lee Sonnenberg, Executive Director of AER was also in attendance. Thank you to AER for being a Gold Level Sponsor! Our other sponsors included Allied Instructional Services (Gold), American Printing House, Accessibyte, Shawnee State University, and the Braille Institute (silver). Our university sponsors were Texas Tech College of Education and San Francisco State University.

In March, we also held a virtual awards ceremony for our annual award winners. I'd like to recognize them once again here:

- Deborah D. Hatton Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award. Dr. Katie Ericson
- Distinguished Service Award, Rosel Dalisay
- Teacher of the Year Award, Spencer Churchill
- Virginia M. Sowell Student of the Year Award, Dr. Saurym Quezada
- Exemplary Advocate Award, Katrina Dubree

Lastly, we held informational webinars. In June, Dr. Lacey Long presented on Usher Syndrome. More recently, Dr. Saurym Quezada presented on the comorbidity of autism spectrum, disorders and visual impairments.

Finally, DVIDB voted to support advocacy efforts at the Capitol. As your President, I attended this advocacy trip along with my son, Garrett. We spoke with staffers and Senators, urging them to keep IDEA Part D funding and the Department of Education. functioning as its' own entity. Lastly, our group went to headquarters for the Council for Exceptional Children, where we met with Associate Executive Director Laurie VanderPloeg.

Please plan to attend our upcoming fall webinar. Remember, these webinars do count for ACVREP credit. Please check our DVIDB FB page for updates as we have them available. Here are the details:

Topic: AI

Tuesday, November 17, 4:30 ET

Presenter: Kristin Grender

For future planning, please mark your calendars for the Council for Exceptional Children Conference in Ohio March 10-13, 2027. As usual, we will host a virtual Preconference in partnership with American Printing House for the Blind (APH) prior to the in-person conference. Stay tuned for more details on our Preconference!

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Relationships and Transitions: The ECC as a Bridge from Early Intervention to Preschool

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Abstract

The Part C to Part B transition within IDEA (2004) is often the primary transition discussed in early education, yet families of young children who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind, or have complex learning needs, including cerebral visual impairment (CVI), navigate many profound transitions long before arriving at an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. From diagnosis onward, families enter unfamiliar medical, educational, and social systems while absorbing evolving information and reimagining what their child's learning and future may look like. Relationships developed among the child, family, and Early Intervention Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (EI-TSVI) during this journey are central to both family experiences and child outcomes.

The Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), typically understood as a framework for disability-specific instruction (Hatlen, 1996), can also guide families in creating rich learning opportunities embedded within everyday routines. Through

relationship-based and reflective practices, EI-TSVIs help families recognize their child's potential and their own role in fostering growth, independence, and participation across home, school, and community settings.

Becoming a Family

One of the most profound transitions in the life of a family is the arrival of a new baby and the unique range of experiences, emotions, joys, and challenges that accompany this change. New parents are shaped by their own experiences of being parented, the communities in which they live, and the circles of support that surround them, including culture, relationships, and access to resources. Alongside the anticipation of a new baby, families begin to imagine a new identity as parents and as a family.

When a child is later diagnosed with a disability, families often must adapt those expectations while navigating unfamiliar systems, relationships, and sources of support. Families may experience lengthy hospital stays, surgeries, and medical procedures that contribute to emotional and financial strain (Cohen et al., 1992, pp. 6-7).

Within this context, we can better understand the profound transitions that occur when families learn that their child has a condition resulting in blindness, low vision, or deafblindness. For many, this transition begins with an abrupt entry

into an unfamiliar world during one of life's most treasured and vulnerable moments. As families adapt to evolving understandings of their child's needs and future, they are simultaneously learning new ways to support development, access resources, and advocate within complex medical and educational systems.

Transitions are often numerous and ongoing throughout the child's first three years, a critical period for families as they adjust and develop relationships with their new baby. Social activities and support may be reduced as parents take on complex caregiving responsibilities, manage numerous medical appointments, navigate available support and educational systems, and realize their new role as the primary advocate for their child (Pogrund & Fazzi, 2002, pp. 29).

Support for families is essential so that caregivers can successfully navigate these transitions, understand their child's visual and sensory needs, and support early learning and development through responsive interactions that help their baby access the world. During the early years, these supports help families build a strong foundation for their child's future learning, participation, and independence.

Relationships and Routines Support Early Learning

Families benefit from having a strong, trusting partnership with an EI-TSVI or other early intervention specialists as they learn to navigate their child's diagnosis, services, and future development. Best practices in early childhood special education embrace a family-centered approach to learning that promotes

the child's emotional relationship with caregivers, sensitive and responsive interactions, and meaningful experiences embedded within daily family routines (Chen, 2014). "The goal of family centered early intervention is to identify and address families' strengths, interests, and priorities to facilitate their capacity, confidence, and competence in promoting optimal development and learning of their very young children with VI" (Hatton et al., 2018). It is within these foundational relationships that learning takes place.

Reflective Practice is a core principle of successful family-centered early intervention that nurtures the relationship between infants and caregivers through thoughtful interactions with their EI-TSVI. Within the broader field of Infant-Family Mental Health, which focuses on the emotional well-being of infants and young children within the context of relationships with caregivers, Reflective Practice supports an attitude of open-mindedness, curiosity, and problem-solving that is particularly well suited to serving young children with complex developmental needs, including cerebral visual impairment, blindness, and low vision (Chen et al., 2024). By pausing to notice their own feelings before responding, practitioners can avoid being reactive and remain grounded in a desire to understand caregivers' unique experiences. Awareness of one's own thoughts, emotions, and reactions helps the EI-TSVI focus on supporting the caregiver-child relationship during home visits through listening, asking open-ended questions,

observing together, and seeking understanding, while remaining aware of how personal experiences influence perspective. This dynamic process creates a safe space for authentic learning and shared understanding between practitioners and families.

Partnering with families in the home environment builds strong, trusting relationships and encourages active participation in familiar routines and family activities. Home is the first natural learning environment where infants and toddlers develop core concepts and skills that will later be applied in community and school settings. Daily routines provide rich opportunities to embed learning experiences for young children who may not access learning through incidental visual observation. Parents learn to build routines that support growth through active participation, social interaction, and repetition during meaningful activities that engage their child's interests (Chen et al., 1990, pp. 3-4). The EI-TSVI engages with families as a learning partner and coach, rather than through a therapy model, supporting infant-caregiver interactions, confidence, and development. Collaboration with physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, infant development specialists, and other providers helps ensure a holistic approach while supporting team understanding of the child's sensory learning needs, strategies for learning through play, and accommodations that support access.

Through daily routines, families begin to recognize and respond to the ways their baby communicates and connects in place of eye contact, such as sharing attention by placing a hand on a caregiver's hand during an activity or stilling to listen as a caregiver enters the room. As families learn how their child experiences the world, they begin to create authentic interactions that bring both joy and learning into everyday life.

Home visits also provide natural opportunities to observe developmental growth and caregiver challenges, identify meaningful activities for the family, model and scaffold new skills, and reflect on outcomes together. The ECC and its nine skill areas provide an ideal framework for guiding early learning across developmental domains while helping caregivers understand their role in nurturing their child's potential.

ECC as a Family Centered Framework

The ECC focuses on supporting the independence and life skills of children who are blind or have low vision in nine essential skill areas that typically developing peers often acquire incidentally through observation. These domains include sensory efficiency, compensatory skills, independent living skills, social interaction skills, self-determination, orientation and mobility, recreation and leisure, assistive technology, and career education. Individualization, careful attention to adapting the environment, and using specific instructional strategies

are all required to access the ECC (Greeley & McCall, 2018, pp. 1-7). Families and EI-TSVIs can partner to design early learning routines, play-based experiences, and family interactions within the framework of the ECC to create a foundation of success for the child and family that begins in infancy and will extend into the school years.

Relationships and Communication

Social Interaction Skills. The domain of social interaction skills is perhaps the first and most important area to support infants and caregivers from birth. Infants are biologically wired to connect with caregivers and form attachment relationships for their care and survival (Bowlby, 1988; National Center on Deafblindness, 2020). Parents who are sighted will naturally seek to connect with their infant through eye contact. As the structures of the eyes mature, brief eye contact and copying facial expressions can begin soon after birth, while stable eye contact is believed to develop by 6-8 weeks (Hyvarinen, 1994; Slater & Lewis, 2007). Supporting caregivers' understanding that their infant's cues and behaviors serve the same bonding purpose as eye contact, such as resting a foot against their caregiver to maintain contact in the same way a sighted child maintains a safe base visually. These behaviors encourage connection and understanding that are foundational to the parent–child relationship and to future social relationships.

Self-Determination. Self-determination is the core sense of confidence, self-awareness, and advocacy that underlies all other areas of the ECC. When a family becomes grounded in their own sense of confidence that they understand and know how to support their child's needs, facilitate the child's participation in the community, effectively advocate for their child to medical professionals and educators, and imagine a bright future for their child, they will model these skills for their child through their words and actions. A child who grows up with supportive family relationships that model all the skills of self-determination (Wolffe & Rosenblum, 2014) and is provided with opportunities to practice such skills, will have the best foundation for internalizing confidence and finding their own voice. The foundational skills children learn in the early years will be applied to new experiences with peers, in school, and in the community.

Exploration and Access

Sensory Efficiency. Sensory efficiency begins at birth, as babies and young children take in and process information from all their senses to explore, understand, and interact with people and things in their environment (Greeley & McCall, 2018, p. 4). Observing a young child's sensory strengths and preferences is the earliest form of Learning Media Assessment (LMA) that can guide caregivers and EI-TSVIs in creating early routines and experiences that support sensory play and learning. Daily routines such as bathtime provide opportunities to

explore sensory concepts such as the sound of water running into the bath, the smell of soap, and the touch of a washcloth to build vocabulary, anticipation, and concepts that also connect with the other ECC domains (e.g., laterality, body parts, directionality, consent). Sensory exploration can be integrated into early literacy activities such as reading aloud to infants to build listening skills, exploring Braille and tactile elements within books to build tactile skills, and creating story boxes with real objects related to the book to build early concepts (Fundelius et al., 2022).

Encouraging tactile shared attention between child and caregiver, such as hand-under-hand activities (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2021), builds opportunities for learning through observation and imitation during play and routines that build upon these early social relationships, encourage communication (National Center on Deafblindness, 2025) and form foundational play skills for future interactions with peers.

Orientation and Mobility. Orientation and Mobility (O&M) begins very early as young children become aware of their own body through bringing their hands to their mouth, playing with their feet, and moving out into space by rolling, scooting, crawling, and walking (Greeley & McCall, 2018, p.6). For infants, building Active Learning play spaces such as a Little Room provide experiences to access cause-and-effect play through movement and the sensory experience of

objects in relation to their body (National Center on Deafblindness, 2022). Learning the purpose of different rooms in the home, how to navigate to them, where familiar items are kept, or employ search patterns to locate a favorite toy are all important early O&M skills. Spaces like the kitchen provide an excellent space to play with common objects used routinely by the family, such as cups, bowls, and spoons. Play creates opportunities to mimic early cane use, such as reaching out away from the body with a long-handled wooden spoon to locate bowls with different sound properties when tapped.

Access Technology. Access (assistive) technology may be introduced early through both low- and high-tech experiences embedded within everyday routines and play. Low-tech tools such as object symbols, tactile markers, adapted switches, communication boards, braille labels, or simple positioning supports can help young children access activities, communicate preferences, and build understanding of cause-and-effect relationships. High-tech options may include VoiceOver on Apple devices, text-to-speech features, augmentative and alternative communication devices, switch-accessed toys, and other technologies that support participation and communication. Opportunities to scribble on a Perkins Braille writer, explore tactile and auditory features of books, or use object communication systems introduce foundational concepts that will support later literacy and technology use. During the early years, families learn that technology is not limited

to electronic devices; rather, it includes a broad range of tools and strategies that increase access, participation, communication, and independence within everyday family activities (Holbrook et al., 2017).

Participation in Family Life

Independent Living Skills. As toddlers grow and develop, home visits provide for opportunities to guide families in ways to integrate learning into familiar routines that extend into areas of life skills. Involving young children in activities such as doing laundry builds upon sensory concepts such as wet vs. dry or clean vs. dirty and learning sequences of events to complete a task. Unloading a dishwasher can provide opportunities to practice concepts such as sorting with spoons and forks. Exploring in the garden or repotting a plant provides opportunities to touch soil, feel the textures of leaves and flowers, smell herbs, and practice using a small shovel or pouring and spraying water. Cooking together integrates sensory play with a variety of materials (e.g., flour, sugar, beans, rice), measuring, pouring, sequencing, and many life skills that can be fun for families to do together.

Recreation and Leisure. As families and EI-TSVIs work together to create early learning experiences through play, young children have opportunities to develop preferences for recreation and leisure that may later become hobbies, interests, and meaningful ways of participating in family and community life.

Families often bring their own beliefs, traditions, and experiences regarding play, recreation, and what they value as enjoyable family activities. Through everyday experiences such as music, water play, movement games, outdoor exploration, library visits, and family outings, young children begin to discover what captures their interest and motivates their engagement. These early preferences provide important opportunities for families to observe strengths, support participation, and create shared experiences that build relationships. Recreation and leisure are therefore not separate from learning; they are natural contexts in which children develop social interaction, communication, sensory exploration, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging within their family and community.

Career Education. Career education begins with stories and through everyday experiences. Discussing the day's events or reading books during bedtime routines can initiate talks about the jobs of people encountered in the community such as store clerks, librarians, and doctors, and visiting places like a fire department or technology company (Wolffe, 1998). Consider watching the garbage pick-up and narrating the event, describe what the cashier is doing to the groceries at check out, or how a barista is making the morning coffee. The more meaningful experiences young children have with people, places, and things to build concepts, the more they will build part-to-whole understanding of the world.

Bridging the Transition to Preschool

The transition from early intervention to preschool is an intense shift for families. They may feel a sense of loss at the relationships with early intervention providers, separation from their direct participation in activities with their child, and anxiety about their child's wellbeing at school, especially if their child is preverbal or has complex medical needs. There is an emotional shift expected toward independence when a family may have experienced three years of fighting for their child's survival. Transition planning begins several months prior to the child's third birthday, but the change from home-based services to school-based services may still feel abrupt to caregivers (Pogrund & Fazzi, 2002).

EI-TSVIs can support families during this transition by creating space for honest sharing and acknowledging the experience of the caregiver while helping families feel prepared with the knowledge and resources they need to make informed decisions for their child. Families may benefit from attending training at their local Family Resource Center to learn about special education assessment, eligibility, the educational planning (individualized education program; IEP) meeting process, and how to participate in creating meaningful learning goals and understanding services. Families feel prepared when they understand their rights, the rights of their child, and how to get advocacy support if needed.

TSVIs can also serve as a bridge between the early intervention team and the preschool assessment team by helping families create a Personal Passport or All

About Me booklet to share important information about their child with the preschool team. Stories or photos sharing how the child and family have engaged in learning experiences through the ECC can be wonderful examples for the preschool team to understand the child's early education, family engagement, and to build meaningful activities for continued growth in the school setting.

Lastly, it is also important for parents to build community with other parents, and to have a network of support from Blindness organizations, Special Education advocacy resources, and organizations such as state Deafblind Services to support them in the future throughout their child's education. Transitions can be challenging. By partnering with families, educators can create a welcoming transition experience and a collaborative network of support that benefits young children throughout their education and into the future.

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Acting, Not Being Acted Upon: Cultivating Agency in Early Elementary Learners Who Are Blind with Complex Needs

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Abstract

Transition is often framed as a secondary or postsecondary concern, yet the foundations for successful transitions begin in early childhood. For young elementary learners with complex needs who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind, educational supports are frequently designed to ensure access and safety. While these supports are essential, they can unintentionally position students as passive recipients of assistance rather than active participants in their own learning and daily routines. Developing the capacity to act within one's environment, rather than being primarily acted upon, is a critical foundation for lifelong learning and transition.

This practitioner-focused article explores how educators can cultivate agency in young learners with complex needs in kindergarten through third grade. Grounded in the expanded core curriculum (ECC), it examines how early instruction can shift

from doing tasks for students to creating opportunities for them to make choices, initiate actions, communicate preferences, and participate meaningfully in their environments. It highlights practical strategies for both classroom and itinerant service contexts and emphasizes the essential role of families and cultural perspectives in shaping independence and participation. By fostering agency early, educators help young learners develop skills and confidence to navigate transitions across the lifespan.

Learning to Act

I was raised Mormon. That may seem like an unusual way to begin an article in an education journal, but one foundational concept from my upbringing has shaped my perspective as an educator. In the Mormon tradition, individuals are taught that a core purpose of the human experience is learning to act for ourselves, rather than simply being acted upon. Over the years, I have found myself returning to this philosophy again and again when observing young learners who are blind, Deafblind, have low vision, and have additional needs (hereafter: learners with complex needs). In many educational environments, students with disabilities experience a life heavily curated *for* them. Adults place materials in learners' hands before they have a chance to reach for them. Adults solve problems before

children can experience them. Adults move children from activity to activity because it is faster, safer, and easier.

I have seen this play out during something as simple as morning arrival. A student enters the classroom. An adult removes the backpack, takes out communication materials, positions the chair, and begins the day's activities. Within a few minutes the student is ready for instruction, but they may not have initiated a single action. Every one of these actions comes from a place of supposed support. Yet, when those patterns are repeated hundreds of times each week, students can learn an unintended lesson: adults make things happen, and children's role is to receive.

Agency develops differently. It grows when students discover that their actions matter. A student reaches for a tactile symbol and an activity begins. They turn their head away and a disliked item is removed. They touch a familiar landmark and successfully find a destination. These moments may seem small, but each action teaches a powerful lesson: *What I do changes what happens next.* According to Shogren and colleagues (2015), self-determination involves acting as the causal agent in one's own life, making choices and taking actions that influence future outcomes. Agency is therefore a foundational component of self-determination because it helps students understand that they can affect their environments, make decisions, and shape their own futures (Ucar et al., 2024). For

early elementary learners, agency is not something that suddenly appears during adolescence when formal transition planning begins. It develops through thousands of everyday opportunities to make choices, communicate preferences, solve problems, and influence the world around them. When educators intentionally create opportunities for agency, they lay the foundation for self-determination and every transition that follows.

Redefining Independence for Students with Complex Profiles

To cultivate agency in the early grades, practitioners must first examine how independence is conceptualized within their educational settings. In many special education environments, independence is treated as a binary construct: a student either performs a task independently or requires adult support. While this framework may appear straightforward, it can unintentionally obscure meaningful forms of engagement for young learners with complex needs.

In my experience working with students with complex learning needs, educational teams often focus on task completion (i.e., product) rather than authentic student contribution (i.e., process). Discussions frequently center on whether a student can complete a routine independently rather than on the student's role within that routine (McWilliam, 2010). When participation is viewed through a product-oriented lens, students who require communication, physical, or sensory support may appear far more dependent than they actually are. This distinction

matters because participation is one of the earliest pathways through which students develop agency and self-determination. Self-determination is not an adolescent milestone that emerges during formal transition planning. Rather, it is a developmental process that begins in infancy and continues throughout the lifespan (Heller et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013). For learners with complex needs, opportunities to exercise self-determination must be intentionally embedded within naturally occurring daily routines from the earliest years of schooling.

If self-determination develops through opportunities to make choices and influence outcomes, a more useful construct may be autonomy rather than independence. Autonomy is not defined by the absence of support; it is defined by the presence of meaningful control and decision-making power (Shogren et al., 2015). A student may not independently zip a coat, navigate a hallway, or prepare a snack without support. However, if that student communicates a preference, initiates participation, directs assistance, or influences the outcome of the activity, they are exercising agency within that task (Palmer et al., 2017; Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013).

The difference between dependence and autonomy becomes particularly important when working with students who have significant motor or communication challenges. For example, a student may be unable to physically put on a coat without assistance. Yet that same student may select between two coats,

extend an arm toward a sleeve, activate a switch to request help, or indicate readiness to transition outdoors. Although adult support remains necessary, the student is actively shaping the interaction rather than passively receiving care.

The Least Dangerous Assumption in Daily Practice

A shift from passivity to autonomy aligns closely with Donnellan's (1984) principle of the least dangerous assumption. In the absence of definitive evidence regarding a student's capabilities, educators should adopt assumptions that minimize the risk of limiting future opportunities.

For students with complex access needs, one of the most consequential assumptions educators can make is that a lack of conventional communication reflects a lack of intent, preference, or understanding. When this occurs, adults often begin making decisions on the student's behalf with increasing frequency. Materials are selected, transitions are adult-initiated, and routines are completed *for and without waiting* for evidence of student participation. In practice, however, many students communicate in ways that are subtle, individualized, and easily overlooked.

Across educational settings, practitioners routinely observe students expressing preferences through changes in body position, facial expression, vocalization, gaze direction, or movement patterns (Smith & Chambers, 2023). What may initially appear to be random behavior often reveals itself as intentional

–albeit subtle–communication when educators consistently observe, interpret, and respond to those actions. The critical issue is not whether every observed behavior is communicative. Rather, it is whether educational teams, alongside families, create opportunities for students to discover that their actions can, in fact, influence their environment. When adults reliably respond to student actions and communication attempts, learners begin to develop an understanding that communication has purpose and power (Bruner, 1983). Such understanding forms a foundational component of self-determined behavior.

Micro-Transitions as Proving Grounds

Professionals often associate transition planning with major educational milestones such as entering middle school, beginning high school, or preparing for adult services. For young children, however, transition is experienced very differently. Their school day consists of dozens of smaller transitions that collectively shape their understanding of participation and control. The movement from the bus to the classroom, from a work area to circle time, or from lunch to recess may appear routine to adults. Yet these moments often provide some of the richest opportunities for developing agency (McWilliam, 2010).

Consider a common arrival routine in depth. In many classrooms, an adult efficiently escorts a student into the building, removes materials from a backpack, positions the student for instruction, and prepares the learning environment. The

routine is safe, organized, and efficient. However, it involves very little active participation from the student. An agency-focused approach does not necessarily alter the destination of the routine, but it changes the student's role within it (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013). The student may locate a tactile marker at the classroom entrance, indicate a greeting preference, assist in retrieving materials, or communicate readiness to begin the day. These actions may seem minor in isolation, yet they represent repeated opportunities for students to experience themselves as active participants in their environments. From this perspective, micro-transitions become more than logistical events (National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, n.d.). They become recurring instructional opportunities through which young learners practice choice-making, initiation, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. Over time, such seemingly small experiences provide the foundation upon which later self-determination and transition-readiness are built.

The Practitioner's Toolkit: Embedding Agency via the ECC

To translate the concept of student agency into daily practice, educators can look to the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC; Hatlen, 2026). For young learners with complex needs, the skill-areas of the ECC is not an "add-on" to the academic day; it is the primary vehicle through which they learn to interact with and control their environment.

Table 1

Student participation in adult directed activities

ECC Domain	"Acted Upon" Practice	"Active" Practice
Self-Determination	Adult selects materials and prompts compliance; adult interprets compliance as success.	Student makes choices using accessible communication tools; student's active rejections are honored.
Orientation & Mobility	Adult passively transports the student through school corridors to maintain the class schedule.	Adult utilizes pauses, hand-under-hand exploration, and tactile landmarks to allow the student to anticipate and guide transitions.
Independent Living Skills	Adult completes self-care tasks (unzipping bags, feeding, cleaning).	Adult scaffolds tasks using hand-under-hand assistance and adaptive tools, allowing the student to perform the initiating actions.
Compensatory Skills	Adult hands a student a braille or tactile graphic card to complete an assignment, physically moving their hands over the shapes.	Adult sets up a structured tactile workspace where the student independently locates their tactile symbols, explores them at their own pace, and uses them to initiate a response.
Assistive Technology	Adult turns on the student's switch-adapted device, sets up the activity, and presses the student's hand down onto the switch when it is "their turn."	The switch is mounted in a consistent, accessible location. The student is given a meaningful pause to independently initiate hitting the switch to request a continuation of a preferred activity.
Social Interaction Skills	Adult pulls the student’s wheelchair into a peer play group and speaks for the student: "Look, everyone, Sarah wants to play blocks with you today!"	Adult supports the student in using a communication device or a specific gesture to independently initiate a greeting or request to join a peer group,

		then steps back to let the natural interaction unfold.
Recreation and Leisure	Adult places a toy or musical instrument in front of the student during free time and manipulates it to entertain them.	Student is supported to explore a sensory routine box or adapted play area, independently selecting which leisure item they want to engage with, how they want to explore it, and when they are finished.
Career Education	Adult cleans up the student's desk, puts away their communication icons, and tells them, "Good job, school is done for today."	Student is assigned an active classroom job within their routine, such as wiping their own tray or returning their attendance card to a designated pocket, learning that their labor contributes to the community.
Sensory Efficiency	Adult adjusts the lighting, switches on the sensory toys, or positions the slant board without input, managing the sensory environment for the student.	Adult introduces changes gradually and observes micro communication (e.g., shielding eyes, reaching toward an auditory source), teaching the student to use their residual vision, hearing, or touch to actively scan and adjust to their environment.

The principles of Active Learning (Johnson et al., 2000) highlight that learners with complex needs do not benefit from passive instruction, rather they require environments that invite them to initiate actions and observe the immediate consequences of those actions. It is crucial that the traditional, invasive practice of hand-over-hand manipulation is replaced with consistent hand-under-hand guidance (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2021), which preserves the student's right to explore, participate, or pull away–all of which are self-agentic behaviors

(Shogren et al., 2015). By intentionally restructuring how educators teach specific ECC domains in kindergarten through third grade, we can shift a student's role from passive recipient to active director of actions. An instructional paradigm shift cannot be limited to a few isolated routines but by recognizing that opportunities for agency occur throughout a young learner's day, pedagogical practice can be shifted. The following table illustrates several ways that adult-directed routines can be reframed to promote active student participation across the ECC.

Service Delivery Considerations: Creating Opportunities for Agency

Promoting student agency across the ECC requires coordinated implementation by the entire educational team. However, the opportunities and challenges associated with the work vary considerably depending on the service delivery model through which instruction is provided. In K–3 settings, services generally fall into two categories: campus-based (where the specialist is embedded full-time within a specialized school, program, or classroom) and itinerant (where the specialist travels between multiple general education schools, providing consultation and direct service). Both models possess distinct advantages for fostering student agency, but both also face unique systemic hurdles—particularly what can be described as the "efficiency trap" versus the "isolation gap" (Torres & Howell, 2004).

The Campus-Based Model: Overcoming the Efficiency Trap

Campus-based specialists benefit from proximity. As they are present throughout the school day, they can observe students across classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, and transportation routines. This proximity promotes consistency in instructional approaches and creates opportunities for collaboration among teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists, and related service providers.

At the same time, specialized educational settings often operate within highly structured schedules. Staff must balance instructional priorities, therapeutic services, transportation schedules, medical needs, and behavioral supports. Under these conditions, efficiency can become a powerful influence on decision-making. As a result, adults may complete routines *for* students because doing so is faster and more predictable. Materials are retrieved, transitions are initiated, and tasks are completed with minimal delay. While these practices may support smooth classroom operations, they can inadvertently limit opportunities for student participation and decision-making (Ucar et al., 2024).

In my experience, one of the most significant shifts occurs when teams begin viewing student engagement within routines as instructional time rather than lost time (Rowe, 1986; Stahl, 1994). Waiting for a student to locate a tactile landmark, retrieve a communication symbol, make a choice, or initiate a familiar routine may require additional time. However, these moments provide valuable opportunities to

develop agency, self-determination, and problem-solving skills that contribute to long-term transition readiness.

Campus-based specialists are uniquely positioned to help teams identify and preserve routine opportunities throughout the day. Their role extends beyond direct instruction to include coaching staff and fostering a shared understanding that participation, choice-making, and self-initiation are not interruptions to learning. They are essential components of learning.

The Itinerant Model: Bridging the Isolation Gap

Itinerant specialists operate within a different set of circumstances (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004). Although they provide highly specialized expertise, their direct contact with individual students with complex needs is often limited. As a result, the effectiveness of agency-focused instruction depends heavily on the ability of classroom teams to implement role-released strategies consistently between visits (Sisti & Robledo, 2021).

The reality of itinerant service delivery presents both opportunities and challenges. Since itinerant professionals frequently serve students across diverse educational settings, they are often well-positioned to identify effective practices and support their implementation. At the same time, limited contact hours mean that recommendations must be practical, clearly communicated, and sustainable within the student's daily environment. One challenge frequently encountered in

itinerant service delivery is ensuring that strategies continue to be implemented when the specialist is not present. General education teachers and paraprofessionals often manage numerous responsibilities throughout the school day and may default to more adult-directed approaches when time is limited or expectations are unclear. For this reason, successful itinerant practice often depends on consultation and capacity-building (Fundelius, 2025). Effective specialists provide explicit modeling, collaborative problem-solving, and concrete examples of how agency can be embedded within existing routines. Recommendations that clearly describe what student participation should look like within a specific activity are often more useful than broad statements encouraging independence.

Whether services are delivered through campus-based or itinerant models, the central goal remains the same: creating environments in which students have repeated opportunities to influence their surroundings, communicate preferences, and participate meaningfully in daily routines. Service delivery structures may differ, but the principles underlying agency remain consistent.

Navigating the Cultural Dimensions of Agency and Independence

Efforts to promote student agency require practitioners to examine the cultural assumptions embedded within educational practice. Much of special education in the United States has historically emphasized individual achievement,

self-sufficiency, and independence as indicators of successful outcomes. We measure progress by what a student can do entirely alone, detached from human intervention.

For many families, however, independence is not necessarily the most important measure of success. Families from collectivist cultural traditions may place greater value on shared responsibility, interdependence, and mutual caregiving within family and community networks (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Within these contexts, providing support to a family member with a disability may be viewed not as a barrier to development, but as an expected and valued expression of familial commitment. As a result, educational teams may occasionally encounter tension between professional expectations based on North American contextual beliefs and family priorities. In practice, these tensions often emerge not because families oppose skill development, but because educators and families are operating from different definitions of what successful participation looks like (Gee & Zebehazy, 2020).

Over the course of my career, I have found that conversations about independence become significantly more productive when they shift away from what a student should be able to do alone and toward how a student participates within meaningful family and community routines. This subtle change in

perspective often reveals that educators and families share many of the same long-term goals, even when they use different language to describe them.

Redefining Agency as Interdependent Autonomy

Recognizing cultural differences does not require practitioners to abandon goals related to self-determination skills or autonomy. Rather, it requires a more nuanced understanding of how such concepts may be expressed across different family systems. Agency should not be conflated with isolation. A student can receive substantial support from family members and educators while still exercising meaningful control over decisions that affect their daily life. The critical question is not whether support is present, but whether the student has opportunities to communicate preferences, make choices, initiate actions, and influence outcomes.

Consider a student whose family routinely assists with meals. An educational team focused exclusively on independent task completion might prioritize self-feeding as the primary outcome. A family, however, may place greater value on participation in shared meals and family interactions. These perspectives need not be incompatible. In such situations, practitioners can work collaboratively with families to identify opportunities for agency within existing routines. A student might choose between food options, indicate readiness for additional servings, communicate preferences, or signal when they are finished.

While support remains present, the student maintains an active role in directing the interaction.

The distinction between agentic participation and what is deemed independence is particularly important for learners with significant sensory, communication, or motor needs. For students with such needs, meaningful participation may provide a more accurate indicator of skills within self-determination than independent task completion alone (Shogren et al., 2015).

Implications for Early Transition Planning

Culturally responsive transition planning begins with inquiry rather than prescription (Zhang & Benz, 2006). Rather than assuming that educational definitions of independence should drive programming, practitioners should seek to understand how participation, responsibility, and decision-making are understood within the student's family and community. Questions such as "How does your child communicate preferences at home?" or "What responsibilities are important within your family's daily routines?" often provide more useful information than asking whether a student performs tasks independently. Open conversations help educational teams identify opportunities to strengthen agency while remaining responsive to family values.

Similarly, discussions about skills related to self-determination can often be framed in terms of communication, safety, and self-advocacy (Palmer et al., 2017;

Wehmeyer 1999). Regardless of cultural background, most families value their child's ability to express needs, communicate discomfort, reject unwanted interactions, and influence decisions that affect their well-being. Self-determination related skills remain essential throughout the lifespan and serve as important foundations for future transition outcomes. When educational teams approach agency through a culturally responsive lens, they move beyond narrow definitions of independence and toward a broader understanding of participation, autonomy, and belonging. True transition planning acknowledges that life is indeed a series of transitions, but it is a journey taken surrounded by community, where a student's capacity to act is magnified, not diminished, by the love and support of their family.

Conclusion: Agency as the Foundation of Transition

Transition planning is often focused on major milestones such as entry into middle school, preparation for employment, or movement into adult services. While these transitions are important, the foundations for successful transition outcomes are established much earlier.

Throughout this article, agency has been presented not as the absence of support, but as the presence of meaningful participation. Many learners with complex needs will continue to require varying levels of assistance throughout their lives. However, the need for support does not diminish the importance of self-

determination skills such as choice-making, self-advocacy, initiation, and personal autonomy.

The goal of transition planning is to prepare students for meaningful participation in their schools, communities, and adult lives, and the work must begin long before formal transition services are introduced in policy. By creating opportunities through wait time and role release for students to act rather than be acted upon during the earliest years of schooling, educators help establish the foundation for self-determination, lifelong learning, and successful transitions across the lifespan.

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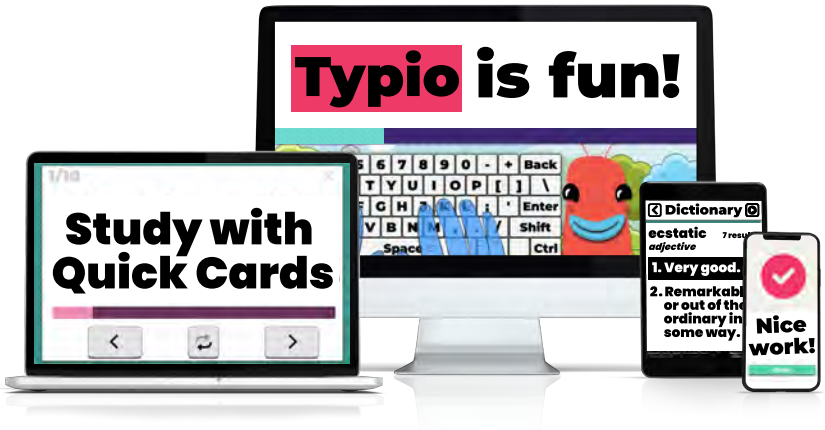
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When School Gets Bigger: Teaching for Meaningful Participation Through the Expanded Core Curriculum in Grades 4–6

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Abstract

The upper elementary years represent a unique instructional window in which educational teams can intentionally scaffold students' use of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), helping them move from supported access toward increasingly active participation as they develop educational independence. During grades 4-6 (from here: middle years), students encounter increasingly complex academic expectations, larger and more dynamic environments, evolving social relationships, and growing responsibility for organizing materials, solving problems, using technology, and advocating for their needs. These changes are not simply preparation for middle school—they create authentic opportunities for students to use the knowledge and skills of the ECC in meaningful contexts while assuming greater ownership of their learning.

Integrating perspectives from the visual impairment field and the learning sciences, this article reframes the middle years as a critical developmental period for

intentionally designing learning experiences that foster meaningful participation and develop transferable skills as educational expectations become increasingly complex. Practical strategies demonstrate how educational teams can use the ECC to scaffold students' participation through collaborative teaming, student voice, family partnerships, spatial literacy, orientation and mobility, and authentic learning experiences embedded throughout the school day.

When School Gets Bigger

On the first day of fifth grade, a student who was once confident navigating a few routes on a small campus now faces a campus three times the size, a rotating schedule, multiple teachers, and a digital platform filled with assignments, messages, and deadlines. The bell rings, peers disperse quickly, and expectations shift almost overnight, from guided routines to increasingly independent decision making. Students are expected to locate classrooms, organize materials, manage changing schedules, collaborate with peers, solve unexpected problems, advocate for their needs, and keep pace with increasingly complex academic expectations.

For students with visual impairments, including those who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind, or have multiple disabilities, success during the transition from lower elementary to middle school depends on far more than learning a new campus or schedule. Students must apply the knowledge and skills

of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC; Hatlen, 1996) to navigate unfamiliar environments, communicate their needs, solve problems, make decisions, and participate actively in learning and school life. The question is not whether students are "ready" for middle school, but whether they have been afforded intentional opportunities to develop these competencies long before the first day arrives.

During the early elementary years (grades 1-3), educators often focus on helping students access learning through explicit instruction, carefully designed supports, and guided experiences. As students enter the upper elementary years (grades 4-5), the instructional emphasis gradually shifts toward supporting them in using those same skills to make decisions, solve problems, advocate for themselves, and participate more actively in school life. This progression requires intentional scaffolding across the ECC and repeated opportunities for students to assume even greater responsibility within the relatively supported environment of middle school (grades 6-8).

Too often, transition planning is viewed as something that begins when students enter high school, prepare for employment, or become eligible for formal transition services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). While these milestones are important, focusing primarily on them can unintentionally narrow our understanding of transition and delay critical

instruction. Transition is an ongoing developmental process marked by changing expectations, environments, relationships, and responsibilities (Eccles et al., 1993). The middle years provide a particularly important opportunity within that process: students are increasingly capable of taking ownership of their learning while continuing to benefit from the structured supports, guided practice, and collaborative teaching of elementary education. Within this developmental context, the ECC becomes a framework for helping students participate more fully in learning, relationships, environments, and school communities.

From Supported Access to Active Participation

During the middle years, expectations shift not only in what students learn, but also in how they are expected to engage with learning. Students increasingly use their knowledge and skills to make decisions, solve problems, collaborate with others, and take greater ownership of their learning (Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield et al., 2006). The developmental progression occurs through learning experiences that gradually shift responsibility from the educator to the student (Lin et al., 2012; Wood et al., 1976).

For students with visual impairments, the knowledge and skills developed through the ECC become tools for participating across academic, social, and community experiences (Hatlen, 1996; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). The instructional emphasis therefore shifts from teaching students what to do toward helping

students recognize when, why, and how to use previously learned skills independently and flexibly across changing contexts.

Expectations Expand, Participation Must also Expand

By the middle years, students are expected to contribute more actively to their own learning. Assignments become longer and more complex, classrooms increasingly emphasize collaboration and inquiry, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instruction relies more heavily on models and visual representations, and students assume greater responsibility for organizing materials, managing time, communicating with adults, and solving problems. Success depends not only on academic knowledge but also on students' ability to respond flexibly as expectations expand.

Broader curricular expectations reflect this shift. The Common Core State Standards emphasize critical thinking, problem solving, analysis of multiple sources of information, and communicating ideas through varied formats (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2024; NEW Education Policy and Practice Department, 2025). Likewise, the Next Generation Science Standards ask students to develop and use models, analyze and interpret data, construct explanations, and engage in evidence-based reasoning (National Research Council, 2013). Across the middle years, students are expected not only to acquire information but also to interpret, apply, and communicate their understanding.

For students with visual impairments, expanding expectations involve far more than accessing printed text. By the end of elementary school, students are expected to work with graphical representations, including maps, diagrams, charts, tables, coordinate systems, and two- and three-dimensional models (Herzberg et al., 2023). During the middle years graphical representations become increasingly important across mathematics, science, geography, and other academic subjects (Herzberg et al., 2023; National Research Council, 2013). Graphicacy and spatial reasoning are foundational to STEM learning and later STEM educational and career pathways (Newcombe & Frick, 2010; Wai et al., 2009). Because many students with visual impairments do not develop graphicacy and spatial reasoning incidentally, they benefit from explicit instruction and purposeful learning experiences that build both competencies (Herzberg et al., 2023; Rosenblum et al., 2018; Rosenblum et al., 2021).

Expanding expectations require more than additional accommodations; students must integrate ECC skills in increasingly complex situations. Choosing appropriate assistive technology for an assignment, organizing materials before class, interpreting a tactile graphic during science, asking clarifying questions during collaborative work, or determining an alternate route when a familiar hallway is blocked all draw upon multiple ECC areas. Instruction in the middle

years can help students recognize when, why, and how to apply previously learned skills as academic, spatial, and social demands become more complex.

Learning Becomes Increasingly Self-Directed

During the middle years, responsibility for learning gradually shifts from educators to students. The shift in responsibility does not mean removing support or expecting students to work independently before they are ready. Instead, the purpose of adult support changes. Educators increasingly coach, model, ask questions, and create opportunities for students to make decisions, solve problems, and reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies (Lin et al., 2012; Wood et al., 1976). Responsibility gradually transfers as opportunities for guided practice, reflection, and decision-making increase.

Consider a student preparing for a science investigation. Rather than organizing every material in advance, the teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI) and classroom teacher might ask the student to identify the tools needed, gather them independently, and determine whether additional supports are necessary. Similarly, during orientation and mobility (O&M) instruction, an educator may pause after an unexpected route closure, allowing the student time to analyze the situation, select a strategy, and explain their reasoning before providing assistance. Such instructional moments help students use previously learned ECC skills to make decisions and solve problems within

everyday school experiences. Educational independence is developed through intentionally designed opportunities for meaningful participation.

Why the Middle Years is the "Just-Right" Window

Students in the middle years are ready to assume responsibility while continuing to benefit from intentional guidance and collaborative support. For students with visual impairments, many skills and concepts that sighted peers develop through incidental learning require systematic instruction and guided practice. Study skills, organization, time management, concept development, and self-determination are among the competencies that benefit from systematic instruction and guided practice (Allman & Lewis, 2014).

As students approach middle school, they also assume greater responsibility for technology, accommodations, and learning needs. Effective assistive technology instruction therefore extends beyond operating a device to include troubleshooting problems, seeking support, and selecting tools that match task demands (D'Andrea & Siu, 2015). Educational independence should not be equated with the absence of support. Self-determination includes understanding personal preferences, establishing goals, making choices, and negotiating for needed supports and services (Wolffe & Rosenblum, 2014). The goal is therefore not complete independence, but increasing capacity to solve problems, advocate for needs, and access support effectively across changing situations.

The middle years therefore offer a "just-right" context for practicing increasingly complex responsibilities while guidance, coaching, and reflection remain readily available. Rather than waiting until students are expected to manage new demands independently, educational teams can use grades 4-6 to gradually shift responsibility while students apply ECC skills within everyday learning experiences.

The Expanded Core Curriculum: An Instructional Framework for Active Participation

The ECC addresses the disability-specific knowledge and skills students with visual impairments need to participate fully in school, home, and community life (Allman & Lewis, 2014). Although its nine areas are often described individually, students use them together. Organizing materials for a science investigation may involve compensatory skills, assistive technology, sensory efficiency, self-determination, and social interaction skills. Navigating a changing school schedule may draw upon orientation and mobility alongside organization, communication, problem solving, and self-advocacy. In practice, the ECC functions not as a collection of separate instructional domains, but as an integrated framework for participation.

Table 1

Intentional Teaching Moves to Support Active Participation in Grades 4–6

Area	Intentional Teaching Moves
Participating in Learning	• Create opportunities for students to select the learning tools that best match the demands of a task rather than automatically providing a preferred format. • Ask students to explain why they chose a particular strategy or technology and reflect on its effectiveness. • Design lessons that require students to interpret information presented through multiple formats, including tactile graphics, diagrams, models, and digital resources. • Gradually shift responsibility for organizing materials, planning assignments, and monitoring progress from the adult to the student.
Participating in Environments	• Ask students to plan routes and identify relevant environmental information before beginning travel rather than automatically providing directions or a predetermined route. • Use changes in familiar environments, such as a blocked route or changed destination, as opportunities for students to analyze the situation, compare options, and determine how to respond. • Ask students to explain what environmental information they used to make an orientation or travel decision and how that information influenced their choice. • Reinforce shared spatial concepts, such as direction, relative position, scale, perspective, and part-to-whole relationships, across O&M and classroom learning experiences.

Participating in Relationships and Opportunities	• Provide structured opportunities for students to practice communicating preferences, requesting assistance or accommodations, joining activities, and solving social problems before applying these skills in less structured interactions with peers. • Invite students to identify activities, responsibilities, clubs, or leadership opportunities that reflect their interests and strengths. • Support students in identifying the tools, accommodations, strategies, or assistance they need to participate rather than determining these supports for them. • Create opportunities for students to reflect on their participation in social, recreational, or extracurricular experiences and consider what they might do similarly or differently in future situations.
Teaching Through Teams	• Begin team meetings by asking, "What is the student learning to do?" rather than "What service will address this goal?" • Identify where students will naturally practice new ECC skills throughout the school day. • Design opportunities for students to use the same skill across home, classroom, and community settings. • Include students in reflecting on which strategies were most effective and where they still need support.

Participating in Learning

As students move through grades 4-6, compensatory skills provide an important foundation for participation, while assistive technology can provide timely and independent access to information across learning environments (D'Andrea & Siu, 2015; Hatlen, 1996; Holbrook et al., 2017; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). Together, compensatory skills and assistive technology support students in

determining how they will access, organize, and communicate information rather than relying on adults to make decisions for them.

Students also learn to gather and interpret information through multiple sensory channels. They may determine which combination of vision, touch, hearing, proprioception, and other sensory information is most effective for a particular task (Holbrook et al., 2017). As academic content becomes more abstract and information is presented through varied formats, students learn to integrate information across modalities and select the sensory channels that provide the most efficient access for a particular learning situation.

For students with multiple disabilities, participation may require intentionally structured learning experiences that account for sensory, motor, communication, and processing needs (Allman & Lewis, 2014; Holbrook et al., 2017). Educators might introduce concepts through real objects before symbolic representations, carefully sequence sensory information, reduce unnecessary environmental complexity, provide additional processing time, and intentionally embed communication opportunities throughout instruction. The goal is not to simplify learning, but to provide meaningful ways for students to engage with content using the strategies most effective for them.

Compensatory skills, assistive technology, and sensory efficiency support active participation when students learn to use them flexibly across the school day.

A student preparing for social studies, for example, may determine whether braille, large print, audio, or digital text provides the most efficient access to an assignment. During a science investigation, another student may integrate tactile graphics, auditory information, assistive technology, and spatial information gathered through touch and movement to interpret data or a scientific model and communicate findings with classmates. Such experiences develop the judgment and flexibility needed to select and coordinate strategies in response to different learning demands.

Participating in Environments

Participation extends beyond the classroom. Students must also learn to navigate and interact with physical, instructional, and community environments. Orientation and mobility, sensory efficiency, and independent living skills support environmental participation by helping students understand where they are, anticipate changes, solve unexpected problems, and engage safely and confidently throughout the school day (Kaiser et al., 2018).

In the middle years, environmental participation becomes more strategic than procedural. Rather than simply following familiar routes or completing established routines, students learn to anticipate changes, interpret environmental information, compare options, and adapt when conditions change. For example, navigating to a new classroom, planning a route to the library, organizing materials

between classes, or responding when a familiar pathway is unavailable requires students to analyze their surroundings, make decisions, and coordinate multiple ECC areas (Fazzi & Petersmeyer, 2001).

Environmental problem solving develops far more than travel competence. Students build spatial understanding, flexible problem solving, and confidence while learning to transfer knowledge across settings. Environmental learning can also strengthen the spatial reasoning used to interpret diagrams, models, and maps, providing an important bridge between O&M and classroom learning. The goal is not simply to complete familiar routes, but to interpret unfamiliar situations, make informed decisions, and adapt strategies in response to new environmental demands.

Participating in Relationships and Opportunities

As students move through the middle years, they are also learning to participate more fully in relationships, extracurricular activities, and leadership opportunities. Social interaction skills, self-determination, recreation and leisure, and career education support students in identifying strengths, communicating preferences, collaborating with others, and exploring interests beyond academic achievement. Meaningful opportunities to use ECC skills can help students see themselves not simply as recipients of support, but as contributing members of classrooms, peer groups, and school communities (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010).

Meaningful participation in relationships and opportunities rarely depends on a single ECC area. Joining a robotics club, serving on student council, participating in recess games, or presenting a classroom project may require students to advocate for accommodations, use assistive technology, navigate unfamiliar environments, collaborate with peers, and solve problems as situations change. Educational teams can use explicit instruction, role-play, and other structured opportunities to help students develop social interaction, self-determination, and recreation and leisure skills before applying them in less structured interactions with peers. As students gain experience, educators can gradually adjust their support while helping students reflect on previously learned strategies and consider how those strategies might apply in new social contexts. With repeated practice and reflection, students begin to recognize that the ECC is not simply something they receive instruction in; its skill areas provide tools for participating more fully in the learning, relationships, and opportunities that make up school life.

Spatial Literacy: The Often-Unseen Foundation

Throughout the learning, environmental, and social experiences described thus far, one foundation has remained largely unseen: spatial understanding. Spatial literacy encompasses the ability to reason about orientation, relationships, scale, and representation and has been identified as foundational to STEM

learning, navigation, and everyday tasks (Hegarty & Waller, 2005; National Research Council, 2006). Whether interpreting a science diagram, organizing materials for a project, locating a classroom, collaborating during a robotics activity, or navigating a changing hallway, students continually interpret relationships in space. These demands are embedded throughout the school day, yet they often go unnoticed because they are rarely understood or taught as a connected set of learning experiences.

For students with visual impairments, spatial understanding rarely develops through incidental visual observation. Instead, students construct it through coordinated experiences involving movement, touch, audition, proprioception, language, and guided exploration. This broader perspective, referred to here as perceptual spatial literacy (Foley, 2025), emphasizes the development of spatial understanding through multisensory, embodied experiences rather than vision alone. During the upper elementary years, perceptual spatial literacy becomes increasingly important as academic expectations shift from concrete experiences toward more abstract representations.

Academic learning and environmental participation may appear to place very different demands on students, yet both draw upon common spatial concepts. Understanding the relative position of features on a tactile map, interpreting scale in a science model, organizing materials within a workspace, and maintaining

orientation while traveling all require students to reason about how objects, people, and places relate in space. Concepts such as directionality, relative position, scale, perspective, sequence, and part-to-whole relationships provide a common foundation across experiences that are often taught separately.

Shared spatial concepts create a natural opportunity for collaboration among TSVIs, O&M specialists, classroom teachers, and related-service providers. O&M and classroom instruction may emphasize different applications of spatial knowledge, but both provide opportunities for students to develop and apply it. O&M instruction builds spatial understanding through purposeful movement, environmental analysis, route planning, and problem solving, while classroom instruction asks students to draw upon those same concepts when interpreting maps, diagrams, models, tactile graphics, and other academic representations. When educational teams reinforce common concepts across settings, students have opportunities to connect what they learn through movement and environmental exploration with the representations and problems they encounter in the classroom. Coordinated instruction can support the development of perceptual spatial literacy throughout the school day.

Learning in Action

During a fifth-grade science unit, a student who is blind explores a tactile model of a watershed before participating in a class investigation. The TSVI

facilitates discussion about elevation, direction of water flow, and relationships among landforms while the classroom teacher connects those concepts to erosion and ecosystems. Later that week, many of the same spatial concepts emerge during O&M instruction as the student considers slope, drainage, environmental organization, and route planning during campus travel. Although each lesson has a different instructional objective, the student encounters related spatial concepts through tactile representation, academic content, and environmental experience, creating opportunities to connect different ways of understanding space.

Perceptual spatial literacy also provides a foundation for tactile graphicacy because interpreting tactile representations requires students to understand how spatial relationships are represented through shape, position, scale, perspective, and part-to-whole organization (Foley, 2025). As students move toward middle school, tactile graphics become more than a means of accessing information; they become tools for interpreting, communicating, and reasoning about increasingly abstract ideas. Developing tactile graphics literacy requires systematic instruction and opportunities to explore different types of representations, interpret the information they convey, and apply learned strategies within academic contexts (Herzberg et al., 2023; Rosenblum et al., 2021). Connecting tactile graphicacy with classroom learning, O&M, and direct spatial experiences can help students draw upon spatial

knowledge developed through multiple experiences when interpreting and reasoning with representations.

Like the broader areas of the ECC, perceptual spatial literacy develops through coordinated instruction and opportunities to use spatial knowledge across people, settings, and learning experiences.

Teaching Through Teams

No single educator—or family member—is responsible for preparing students for successful transitions across educational settings. Opportunities to use ECC skills occur throughout the school day, at home, in the community, and through interactions with different people. A classroom teacher may notice when a student struggles to organize materials, a family member may identify an emerging interest or responsibility at home, and a TSVI or O&M specialist may recognize opportunities to apply previously taught skills in a new context. When teams share observations and coordinate instruction, everyday experiences can become opportunities for students to practice and extend ECC skills beyond specialized instruction.

Students as Active Partners

Students are not simply the recipients of transition planning; they are active participants in it. Although upper elementary students are still developing self-awareness and other self-determination skills, they are capable of identifying

interests, expressing preferences, reflecting on successes and challenges, and participating meaningfully in educational decision making. Involvement in individualized education planning (IEP) meetings can begin early and expand over time, from contributing information about strengths, preferences, and goals to taking a more active role in leading portions of the meeting. Student-led IEP practices provide opportunities to develop and exercise self-determination skills within authentic educational decision making (McNaught et al., 2024).

Inviting student voice extends beyond asking, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It includes helping students recognize which learning tools work best for them, explain how they access information, set personal goals, and communicate when they need assistance or accommodations. These experiences give students authentic opportunities to assume greater ownership of their learning (Wolffe & Rosenblum, 2014).

Student voice should also influence instructional planning. A student's interests, strengths, cultural identity, communication preferences, and personal goals provide meaningful starting points for selecting ECC priorities and creating engaging learning opportunities. Incorporating student perspectives allows educational teams to design learning experiences with students rather than simply for them.

Families and caregivers as co-designers of learning

Families and caregivers create many of the everyday learning experiences through which students practice using ECC skills beyond school. They possess deep knowledge of their child's strengths, interests, routines, cultural values, and long-term hopes—knowledge that cannot be replicated through school-based assessment alone. Family perspectives help educational teams identify priorities that are meaningful, relevant, and connected to students' lives beyond the classroom.

At the same time, educational teams should recognize that families may hold differing perspectives regarding independence, interdependence, risk, and participation (Chen, 2001). These perspectives are often shaped by cultural values, lived experiences, community expectations, and previous interactions with educational systems (Bau, 1999). For some families, shared responsibility and mutual support may be valued as highly as individual independence. Such differences should not be viewed as barriers, but as opportunities for collaboration and shared learning. Rather than assuming a single pathway toward independence, educational teams can engage families in conversations about what participation, safety, responsibility, and self-determination look like within their cultural contexts. By listening first and building upon family strengths, educational teams

are better positioned to develop learning opportunities that are both culturally responsive and educationally meaningful.

Shared Responsibility for Creating Opportunities

When the first day of 7th grade arrives, a student faces an unfamiliar campus, new routines, multiple teachers, and increasing expectations. They did not become prepared for those demands by mastering a single skill. Preparation developed over time as the student learned to make decisions, solve problems, communicate, explore, collaborate, and assume greater responsibility across everyday learning experiences. These opportunities began long before the first day of middle school and were grounded in the student's strengths and interests, informed by family and caregiver perspectives, and reinforced by educators across school, home, and community settings.

The middle years offer a unique instructional “just right” window for this developmental work. Students are ready to take greater ownership of their learning while continuing to benefit from guidance, coaching, explicit instruction, and collaborative support. Grades 4-6 therefore provide an important context for helping students manage materials, select tools and strategies, interpret increasingly complex information, navigate changing environments, collaborate with others, communicate their needs, and respond when familiar approaches no longer work.

The ECC provides a framework for supporting this progression, but its value extends beyond mastery of individual skill areas. Students need opportunities to use what they have learned in new situations, recognize connections across experiences, and adapt their knowledge as circumstances change. Across the ECC, the instructional goal expands from successful completion of an immediate task toward developing knowledge and strategies that students can draw upon throughout their educational journey.

Students will still encounter unfamiliar environments, new expectations, and unexpected challenges. Successful transition does not mean eliminating those challenges. It means that students enter the next educational setting with experiences making decisions, solving problems, communicating their needs, seeking support, and adapting what they know to new situations. In doing so, we help students learn not simply how to access school, but how to participate in it.

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LOW INCIDENCE SENSORY DISABILITIES

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GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Intervention Specialist: Visually Impaired Licensure Program

A 22-credit hour program offering graduate level coursework leading to licensure as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI). The program is designed to be completed in one year and applicants must hold a valid Ohio teaching license. Coursework is mostly online with extensive face-to-face field and practicum experiences.

Intervention Specialist: Hearing Impaired Licensure Program

A graduate level, 24-credit hour program offering coursework leading to licensure as a teacher of the Deaf/ hard of hearing. The program is designed to be completed in one year and applicants must hold a valid Ohio teaching license. Coursework is mostly online instruction with extensive face-to-face field experiences.

Certificate in Deafblindness Education

A graduate level, 15-credit hour program, leading to a certificate in Deafblind Education from Shawnee State University. This certificate will meet the post baccalaureate education needs of working professionals. The program courses provide in-depth knowledge of the needs of and supports for children with combined hearing-vision loss (also known as deafblindness) and is aligned with CEC standards for deafblindness

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A 30-credit hour program offering undergraduate level coursework leading to a Shawnee State issued Intervener Certificate. The Intervener Program is designed to be completed in two years. Applicants must meet the admission requirements at Shawnee State University. An intervener provides consistent one-to-one support to a student who is Deaf, blind or dual sensory impaired (ages 3 through 21) throughout the instructional day. Coursework is primarily completed in an online format, culminating with a field based practicum experience.

- Online Coursework through our Consortium partner institutions of higher education
- Field based practicum/internship experience
- Funding support provided by the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, Office for Exceptional Children
- Aligned with Ohio Priorities
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Integrating Competency-Based Education and the Expanded Core Curriculum for Students with Visual Disabilities

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Abstract

Transition planning for high school students with visual disabilities should do more than document postsecondary goals and required services. A transition plan is not evidence of readiness. Students also need opportunities to develop and demonstrate the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) competencies they will need for life after graduation. This article examines how competency-based education (CBE) and deeper learning can connect ECC instruction and 21st-century skills more intentionally to transition planning. CBE clarifies learning targets, success criteria, and evidence of proficiency, while deeper learning shapes the experiences through which students develop, apply, and transfer competencies. Examples show how teams can use formal and informal assessment data, strengths-based planning, repeated practice, rubrics, portfolios, and coordinated instruction to move from isolated activities to coherent learning. The discussion considers itinerant and

school-based service models and collaboration with students, families, educators, and adult-service partners. Together, these approaches move transition planning beyond compliance toward evidence of what students can actually do.

More Than an IEP Requirement

For youth with visual disabilities, transition planning represents a critical crossroads between education and adulthood. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), measurable postsecondary goals and transition services must be included no later than the first individualized education program (IEP) in effect when a student turns 16 or earlier as determined appropriate by the IEP team or required by state law. The process coordinates school personnel, students, families, and community agencies toward a shared vision for life after graduation. Yet the reality often falls short: transition planning may not fully reflect students' skills and needs, and collaboration among school personnel, families, and adult service providers may be inconsistent (Brown, 2009; Travers & Muri Irland, 2025). Gaps in transition planning and collaboration can determine whether students step into adulthood prepared or unsupported.

Disability Specific Instruction

The Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), developed by Phil Hatlen in 1996, addresses instructional areas directly affected by a student's visual impairment

(Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). The ECC's nine skill areas—compensatory access skills, sensory efficiency skills, use of assistive technology, career education, orientation and mobility, self-determination, independent living skills, social interaction skills, and recreation and leisure—collectively form a critical component of a student's educational journey. In a survey of teachers of students with visual impairments (TSVIs), some educators described mastery of ECC skills as the "difference between life and a successful life" (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010, p. 342).

Formal research examining the central role of the ECC in preparing youth for adulthood through transition planning remains limited. Since its inception, the ECC has been recognized as critical for promoting quality-of-life outcomes for students with visual disabilities (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). However, limited ECC-specific assessment and instructional resources can make systematic integration of the ECC into transition planning challenging.

When Transition Planning and ECC Instruction Remain Separate

Historically, ECC instruction and transition planning have operated as separate processes, with limited connection between the two. In many cases, transition planning has functioned as a compliance-exercise focused on meeting IDEA (2004) requirements, while ECC instruction has occurred in a separate instructional silo. Students have moved through systems in which their post-school goals did not explicitly drive the identification of critical ECC skills they needed to

develop. This structural disconnect can undermine the effectiveness of both processes.

The transition-planning context differs for itinerant and school-based TSVIs. Itinerant TSVIs are often not the case managers who lead transition planning, and they may have limited opportunities to observe students across environments. Many serve students across multiple schools—and sometimes multiple districts—while managing travel, competing schedules, different school systems, and limited collaborative planning time. Such conditions can make sustained coordination and follow-through difficult, even when the TSVI clearly recognizes what a student needs. Their contributions depend on communicating ECC assessment data, identifying how vision loss affects a student's postsecondary goals, and collaborating with the IEP team to determine necessary instruction.

School-based TSVIs may have more frequent access to students and more opportunities to integrate the ECC throughout the school day. However, greater access does not mean that everyone is on the same page. Authentically developing and addressing transition goals can remain challenging when team members do not share the same understanding or do not view transition planning as part of their responsibility. Teams must also determine whether skills developed in a specialized setting transfer to the student's home, community, postsecondary

education, and employment environments. Both service models require an intentional connection between transition goals and ECC instruction.

Transition planning supports students as they prepare for life after graduation in the areas of education or training, employment, and, when appropriate, independent living. The IEP includes measurable postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessments and identifies the services needed to help students achieve them (IDEA, 2004). Assessment data, combined with student and family input, guide the development of meaningful, student-centered transition goals (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2022).

Meeting IDEA's transition requirements, however, does not necessarily ensure that students with visual disabilities have authentic opportunities to develop and apply skills in work and community settings. Grades may provide an incomplete picture of readiness when they do not accurately reflect students' demonstrated competency and level of independence (Thatcher & Crozier-Fitzgerald, n.d.). The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision identifies early work experience, academic achievement, and social and internal skills as important predictors of positive employment outcomes for youth (National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, 2020). Yet participation alone is insufficient. Students need opportunities to build skills, take initiative, solve problems, and learn from feedback. Transition teams

must therefore provide ongoing opportunities to practice ECC and career-related competencies in authentic contexts while gathering evidence of student proficiency and areas requiring additional support. If transition planning and ECC instruction are to function as a unified process, educators need a framework that connects assessment, instruction, and postsecondary goals.

From Transition Goals to Transferable Competencies

Competency-based education (CBE) can provide a framework for clarifying, teaching, and assessing ECC competencies to support meaningful transition outcomes. Also referred to as mastery-based, performance-based, or proficiency-based education, CBE personalizes learning around student needs, strengths, and interests and establishes clear learning objectives that give students greater ownership of their education (Sturgis & Casey, 2018). Progress is based on demonstrated competency rather than time or completion of instruction. Competencies are defined through explicit, measurable, and transferable objectives that encompass knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Marzano et al., 2017). For ECC instruction, this means making learning targets and success criteria clear, so students understand what they are learning, why it matters, and what proficiency looks like. By clarifying learning targets, success criteria, and related splinter skills, CBE reduces subjectivity in assessment and helps identify where gaps remain.

Educational teams can use deeper learning to move ECC instruction beyond isolated skill practice. Deeper learning is the process through which students develop knowledge and skills that they can apply and transfer to new situations (National Research Council, 2012). Within ECC instruction, it provides authentic opportunities for students to apply new knowledge in work and community settings, make decisions, solve problems, and engage in productive struggle. The goal is not for students to identify which ECC skill they are using, but to draw upon multiple competencies simultaneously as they respond to real-life situations.

For example, a student working in retail does not need to identify that a task requires assistive technology, social interaction, self-determination, and career education skills. Competence is demonstrated when the student integrates those skills to access the register, communicate with customers, solve unexpected problems, and complete job responsibilities. Transition assessment can help students identify strengths, interests, preferences, and areas for growth, while project-based learning provides opportunities to apply learning, evaluate progress, and develop greater agency and self-determination (Marlina et al., 2025). The transition plan identifies intended outcomes, but readiness is demonstrated when learning is applied in authentic situations.

Together, the principles of CBE and the ECC provide a framework for meaningful instruction, with CBE serving as the structural architecture, or the

"how," and the ECC serving as the essential content, or the "what." Although ECC instruction is often delivered through discrete lessons, adult life rarely requires competencies to be used in isolation. CBE makes competencies and success criteria explicit, while deeper learning supports the integration and transfer of those competencies across environments. For students with visual disabilities, who often experience reduced access to incidental learning, this integrated approach helps address gaps in knowledge, skills, behaviors, and experiences. By embedding the ECC within a CBE framework grounded in deeper learning, TSVIs can move transition planning beyond compliance toward student-directed mastery and transferable competence.

Strengths-based transition planning begins with students' existing strengths, interests, and aspirations. IDEA requires transition planning to consider students' strengths, preferences, and interests (IDEA, 2004), and within a CBE framework, these strengths become the starting point for identifying and developing the competencies needed to pursue transition goals (Yeager & Deardorff, 2022). Educational teams can then work backward from a student's aspirations to identify the ECC competencies needed to achieve those goals. The process begins by asking, "What strengths does this student already possess?" and "How does vision loss affect the student's ability to pursue this goal?" A competency framework helps identify which competencies need to be developed and at what level of

instructional intensity, connecting ECC instruction directly to transition goals rather than treating the nine ECC areas as a separate set of activities.

Returning to the retail example, a student whose employment goal is full-time retail work may already have summer work experience, know how to operate a register, and follow shift directions. Assessment may indicate a need for additional instruction in magnification and customer interaction. Rather than treating these as separate ECC areas, the team identifies how assistive technology, social interaction, self-determination, and career education competencies work together within authentic job responsibilities. The student and team can then develop a strengths-and-needs map identifying learning targets, success criteria, and targeted instructional priorities. Team members determine who will provide instruction and where competencies will be practiced and demonstrated. A TSVI may teach magnification skills while a job coach provides opportunities to practice customer interactions. The team can then review performance data, adjust instructional intensity, and monitor whether competencies transfer across situations.

Assessing Competencies and Instructional Priorities

Intentional planning begins with a clear picture of the student's current performance. Educational teams should draw upon formal and informal data to ask, "What knowledge, skills, concepts, and experiences may be missing or

underdeveloped because vision loss changes access to incidental learning?" The functional visual assessment (FVA) provides detailed information about how the student functionally uses vision and identifies limitations and access needs associated with visual functioning across tasks and environments. ECC assessment helps identify knowledge, skills, concepts, and experiences that may be missing or underdeveloped and require targeted instruction. Student and family input, observations, work samples, rubrics, and performance data provide additional evidence of how the student applies learning in authentic situations. Together, these data help the team connect the impact of vision loss to specific transition goals and determine instructional priorities.

The practices in Table 1 illustrate how deeper learning can be applied within ECC instruction and transition planning. Together, they move instruction beyond isolated activities by clarifying what students are expected to learn, how they will practice it, and what evidence will demonstrate competence and transfer.

Table 1

Applying Deeper Learning Practices to ECC Instruction within Transition Planning

Deeper-Learning Practice	What Changes in ECC Instruction	What It Looks Like in Transition Planning
Design authentic, ongoing, project-based learning experiences	Design a connected sequence of learning experiences rather than a single activity or event. Complex tasks may be taught in smaller parts, but students need repeated opportunities to connect the parts, complete the full process, reflect on their performance, and apply their learning under varied conditions.	A student preparing to travel to work may first compare routes, then determine schedules and costs, identify needed accommodations, and practice individual portions of the trip. The student gradually connects the steps and completes the entire trip more than once, reflecting after each experience and adjusting strategies or supports. One completed trip documents participation; it does not, by itself, demonstrate competence or transfer.
Analyze the vision-specific impact on learning and performance	Use formal and informal evidence to identify what the student already demonstrates, what learning may be missing or underdeveloped, and which competencies require instruction. Connect each instructional target to the identified impact of vision loss.	For a student preparing for retail employment, the team examines how the student accesses print on a register, gathers information from the environment, interacts with customers, and responds when information is not immediately available. A strengths-to-targets comparison can identify the student's current strengths, learning that may be missing or underdeveloped, competencies or splinter skills that need to be built, and the evidence that will demonstrate proficiency.

Assessing Competency and Transfer

To monitor strengths-based instruction, assessment must be purposeful and flexible. Within a CBE framework, assessment must do more than document that a student participated in an ECC lesson. It must clarify what proficiency looks like, identify the type and intensity of support the student needs, and show whether the student can apply and transfer the competency across settings. Because few formal assessment tools exist for most ECC areas, TSVIs need both formal and informal data to develop a complete picture of student performance. Observations, task analyses, rubrics, checklists, student reflections, work samples, and portfolios can provide evidence of what the student currently demonstrates and where instruction should begin. Several existing resources can help teams move from broad ECC areas to clearly defined competencies.

Experiences in Transition (EXIT) Assessment

Within EVALS: Evaluating Visually Impaired Students, developed by the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, 2007), the Experiences in Transition (EXIT) assessments are particularly useful for transition planning. They provide detailed skill checklists that teams can use to identify competencies for lesson planning or as a foundation for developing competency rubrics. EXIT includes one version for students expected to require continuous support as adults and another for students expected

to require minimal to moderate support. The two versions help teams consider competency in relation to the student's anticipated level of adult support rather than applying the same expectations to every student.

Resources for Blindness and Low Vision (RBLV)

Resources for Blindness and Low Vision (RBLV), formerly known as MDE-LIO, provides independent living skills resources that include a checklist, grade-level guides, practice calendars, and instructional materials. The resources can help teams identify skills that require systematic instruction and coordinate practice across school and home environments (Resources for Blindness and Low Vision, n.d.).

Expanded Core by Clark

Two resources developed by this author provide more targeted support for planning ECC instruction across grade levels. The Expanded Core High School Readiness Checklist (Clark, n.d.-a) is designed for students from preschool through grade 9. It encourages teams to address foundational ECC learning before high school rather than waiting until missing or underdeveloped skills have compounded and become barriers during transition planning. For students in grades 9-12 and beyond, the Expanded Core 9-12+ Competency Rubric (Clark, n.d.-b) helps teams establish individualized advancement criteria, determine

whether a skill is being developed in one environment or generalized across settings, and identify the evidence that will demonstrate progress.

Perkins College Readiness Checklist

The Perkins College Readiness Checklist provides another valuable resource for students considering postsecondary education (Thatcher & Crozier-Fitzgerald, n.d.). Students can use the checklist to evaluate their own skills, while educators can compare the student's self-evaluation with observed performance, identify an instructional entry point, and connect learning priorities to postsecondary goals. The student-facing language creates opportunities for honest self-reflection and shared decision-making. Checklists help teams identify where to look more closely and where instruction may need to begin. Competency rubrics clarify what progress toward proficiency looks like and what evidence will demonstrate it.

Project-Based Learning Portfolios

Clearly defined competencies and success criteria can then serve as ongoing formative assessment tools that the student and team use across environments. For example, a TSVI and job coach might use a task analysis to identify the individual steps within a workplace task and a competency rubric to describe the expected quality of performance and level of support. The student can use the same criteria to establish a baseline, self-assess, and monitor growth over time. A powerful application of this approach is project-based learning portfolios, as highlighted by

Dr. Rachel Anne Schles through her work with the National Center on Deaf-Blindness (Schles, 2018). Schles's model empowers students to select and curate artifacts—such as project reports, audio recordings, or assistive technology demonstrations—that showcase their mastery of academic and ECC competencies. When artifacts are collected across experiences and over time, the portfolio can show growth, the level of support the student needs, and whether learning transfers to new settings. It also gives students concrete evidence they can use when reporting their progress and participating in IEP and transition planning decisions.

Assessment becomes meaningful when teams use evidence to guide instruction and transition planning. Evidence of competency and transfer across settings provides a clearer picture of readiness than participation alone. This evidence can help teams identify instructional priorities, determine supports, and align goals, services, and practice opportunities.

From Coverage to Coherence in ECC Transition Planning

Implementing CBE within ECC instruction requires TSVIs and educational teams to intentionally connect transition assessment, students' strengths, preferences, interests, and goals, ECC priorities, instructional targets, success criteria, and evidence of transfer. Postsecondary goals remain ambitious, while CBE helps teams translate those goals into targeted competencies and instructional priorities that build toward them.

At schools for the blind, TSVIs are often directly involved in transition planning, although responsibility for case management may vary. Working within the same program can provide greater capacity to connect assessment information, student strengths and goals, ECC competencies, instruction, and progress monitoring within the transition plan. Academic teachers, residential staff, related-service providers, transition personnel, and TSVIs may all contribute to the same competency through different environments and experiences. However, proximity alone does not produce coherence. Teams must still establish shared expectations, clarify responsibilities, and monitor whether instruction is moving the student toward the intended outcome.

An itinerant TSVI may have less influence over how a transition plan is developed and implemented, but they bring an essential ECC lens to the process. The TSVI can examine a student's postsecondary goals and ask what knowledge, skills, concepts, and experiences may be missing or underdeveloped because vision loss changes access to incidental learning. For a student planning to attend college, this might include managing academic responsibilities, accessing course materials, communicating with professors, and requesting accommodations. For a student pursuing employment, it might involve transportation, technology use, workplace communication, and problem solving.

For both school-based and itinerant TSVIs, the goal is not to document one successful performance. Teams need clear, observable success criteria and repeated evidence across time, tasks, environments, and levels of support. For itinerant TSVIs in particular, shared criteria help other members of the IEP team contribute evidence and reinforce learning when the TSVI is not present.

Supporting this shift requires time for teams to apply the ECC lens to transition goals, develop shared success criteria, and examine student evidence. Whether services are delivered through school-based or itinerant models, coherence emerges when transition goals, ECC priorities, instruction, and assessment are intentionally connected.

Collaboration for Coherent Transition Planning: Interprofessional and Interagency Collaboration

Transition planning for high school students with visual disabilities depends on coordination among the student, family, special educators, TSVIs, orientation and mobility specialists, general educators, related-service providers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and Pre-Employment Transition Services providers. Unclear responsibilities, uneven knowledge of adult-service systems, competing demands, inconsistent follow-through, and late agency involvement can leave services disconnected. Research involving educators of transition-aged students with visual disabilities has identified limited collaboration and a need for continued

training and resources related to transition practices and postschool services (Travers, 2024; Travers & Muri Irland, 2025).

The TSVI's primary contribution is bringing the ECC lens to the transition-planning process. A broad postsecondary goal does not automatically identify the vision-specific knowledge, skills, concepts, and experiences a student will need to achieve it. The ECC report and present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) should include specific, measurable, and defensible evidence drawn from formal and informal data sources that establishes current performance and adds vision-specific depth to transition goals. Although braille, assistive technology, and orientation and mobility often receive considerable attention, TSVIs must apply the full ECC framework to identify needs that may otherwise be overlooked, particularly in career education and self-determination. Rather than treating ECC areas as isolated silos, teams should examine how competencies across domains interact to support transition goals.

For example, college attendance as a postsecondary goal does not fully explain the preparation required. TSVI assessment data can help identify the vision-specific competencies that need to be developed, determine who will support each area of need, and locate authentic opportunities for practice. Some needs may require supplemental experiences such as college-preparation programs for students with visual disabilities, summer work experiences, or mentoring from

adults with visual disabilities. Research supports the relationship between high school work experience, postsecondary education, several ECC-related skills, and later employment outcomes (Lund & Cmar, 2020).

Because programs, personnel, eligibility requirements, and adult-service systems change, teams may benefit from a shared digital transition-implementation system rather than a static collection of links. Organized around common decisions and actions, such a system can help educators determine how to get started, what to do next, and which actions should be considered. Teams can also capture institutional knowledge through a practical frequently asked question (FAQ) developed from experienced educators, providing guidance for those new to working with transition-aged students. Such a system could pair guidance with current agency contacts, descriptions of agency scope, eligibility and referral information, timelines, vetted mentors, and directories of short-term programs, summer work opportunities, and camps. It could also organize online resources into guided learning sequences. For example, recorded college-readiness programming available through APH's Virtual ExCEL Academy could be paired with guidance explaining when and how a teacher or student might use it (American Printing House for the Blind, n.d.).

A digital implementation system supports both service-delivery models differently. For itinerant TSVIs, it reduces the need to repeatedly locate and

recreate resources across districts and communities. For schools for the blind, it can support coordinated partnerships and connect campus instruction with opportunities beyond the school. The system does not replace collaboration; rather, it provides a shared source of current guidance and resources that strengthen communication, coordination, consistency, and follow-through.

Family Partnership and Culturally Responsive Transition Planning

Families contribute essential information about how high school students use their knowledge and skills at home and in the community. School and family reports, however, may describe different levels of performance. A student who completes a task independently at school may rely on family assistance at home, even when the necessary skills have been demonstrated. Rather than treating either perspective as inaccurate, teams can use these differences to examine transfer, initiation, expectations, routines, and the type and intensity of support used across environments.

CBE provides shared success criteria for examining performance across school, home, work, and community settings. The goal is not to expect students to complete every task without assistance. Rather, it is to develop an accurate understanding of what the student can do, what support is needed, and how that support changes across environments.

Authentic family partnership begins before a transition plan is presented for approval. Person-centered approaches such as Making Action Plans (MAPS) bring together the student, family, school personnel, and other members of the support network to identify strengths, interests, preferences, needs, hopes, and priorities before goals are developed. Families can help identify natural supports and opportunities outside school while the student remains at the center of the process. The resulting vision can then guide postsecondary goals, transition services, and action steps (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2022). The process moves families from signing off on school-developed goals to helping shape them.

Culturally responsive transition planning also requires teams to examine whether their practices support meaningful participation. Culturally and linguistically diverse families may encounter language barriers, limited information about adult services, differing communication needs, and unfamiliarity with the transition process. Research suggests that families are often positioned as listeners rather than decision-makers during transition planning (Aleman-Tovar & Burke, 2022). Rather than interpreting limited participation as disinterest, teams should consider whether information is understandable, culturally relevant, and provided early enough for families to participate meaningfully. Cultural liaisons

and interpreters can help ensure that terminology related to visual disabilities, the ECC, and adult services is communicated accurately (Gee & Zebehazy, 2020).

Culture also shapes how families define adulthood, contribution, and independence. Traditional North American transition models often emphasize self-reliance, competitive employment, and independent living, while some families place greater value on interdependence, shared responsibilities, and contribution to the family or community. Maintaining high expectations does not require teams to impose a single definition of a successful adult life. Applying the least dangerous assumption means presuming that the student can learn, participate, and contribute meaningfully, even when the form of adult participation differs from dominant expectations (Donnellan, 1984).

For example, a culturally responsive goal might address the assistive technology and home-management competencies needed to manage family grocery purchases or coordinate household schedules rather than assuming success requires moving away from the family home. CBE can establish clear expectations while allowing the context for demonstrating competency to reflect the student's goals, family roles, and culture.

Whether working in an itinerant program or at a school for the blind, TSVI teams can strengthen family participation by developing brief, accessible resources that explain how the ECC connects to transition planning, how vision-specific

needs may affect preparation for life after graduation, and how families can support ECC learning. A companion glossary can explain common ECC and transition terminology in clear language. Because TSVIs already balance substantial instructional, assessment, collaboration, and compliance responsibilities, these resources should be brief, reusable, and maintained at the program level rather than recreated by individual teachers. They can be shared before meetings, translated into families' preferred languages, adapted for accessibility needs, and hosted alongside other transition resources, including a shared digital transition implementation system.

Family partnership strengthens coherence by connecting school-based evidence with the student's performance, responsibilities, supports, and aspirations outside school. Transition planning becomes more meaningful when student goals, family knowledge, cultural values, ECC competencies, and authentic practice opportunities contribute to the same vision for life after graduation.

From Transition Plans to Readiness

The transition from school to adult life is a critical period for youth with visual disabilities. A transition plan is not evidence of readiness. Students may have measurable postsecondary goals and complete transition activities without demonstrating the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and experiences needed to pursue those goals. For students with visual disabilities, readiness also depends on

whether instruction addresses gaps in expanded core learning. Integrating the ECC within a CBE framework grounded in deeper learning offers a pathway forward. Together, these approaches can move transition planning from coverage to coherence by connecting assessment data, student strengths and goals, clear learning targets, authentic practice, and evidence of transferable competence.

The way this approach is implemented will vary across itinerant and school-based service models. In either model, students, families, educators, and agency partners must work toward a shared and ambitious vision for life after graduation while recognizing the student's individual needs, culture, and preferred level of support. The goal is not simply to complete a transition plan or expose students to a collection of ECC skills. Rather, students should develop the ability to intentionally draw upon and integrate what they have learned, recognize when support is needed, and apply their competencies in new situations. Ultimately, transition planning should prepare students with visual disabilities to enter adulthood not only with a plan, but with the competence, confidence, and adaptability to thrive.

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Integrating Expanded Core Curriculum Skills in Authentic Contexts: A Practice Report

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Transition to adulthood for students with visual disabilities requires the coordinated development of skills across multiple domains, including orientation and mobility (O&M), independent living, social communication, and self-determination. These domains are addressed within the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), which encompasses skills and concepts that may not be acquired incidentally through visual observation and experience (Hatlen, 1996). Instruction in areas of the ECC has been associated with positive postsecondary outcomes, including employment, postsecondary education and training, and community participation (Lund & Cmar, 2020; Wolffe & Kelly, 2011). Independent travel skills and transportation self-efficacy have also been associated with employment outcomes among individuals with visual disabilities (Cmar, 2015; Cmar et al., 2018), underscoring the importance of developing applied mobility competence beyond school-based settings.

In addition to skill acquisition, confidence plays a critical role in whether students effectively apply these skills. Although students and families reported high expectations for future independence, confidence was comparatively lower in areas such as community travel and public transportation (Cmar & Steverson, 2023). This suggests that possessing skills alone may be insufficient without opportunities to apply them in real-world contexts.

Environmental complexity further shapes the development of independence. Navigating unfamiliar environments requires access to multiple sources of information to support trip planning, anticipate accessibility barriers, and orient within unfamiliar spaces (Müller et al., 2022). For individuals with visual disabilities, these demands are intensified by inconsistent access to environmental information and the need for advanced planning strategies. As a result, effective transition programming must extend beyond isolated skill instruction to include opportunities for problem-solving within authentic environments.

Experiential and community-based learning approaches offer one pathway for supporting the application of transition skills in authentic settings. Community travel skills have been associated with later employment among youth with visual disabilities, supporting the value of off-campus O&M instruction and transition experiences that provide opportunities to practice independent travel (Cmar, 2015). Such experiences allow students to apply and generalize skills across contexts

while building confidence and self-efficacy (self-determination skills) through authentic participation. Together, these findings highlight the importance of providing opportunities for students to integrate and apply ECC skills within authentic environments.

Immersive transition experiences offer one structured approach to providing such opportunities. By integrating multiple ECC domains in real-world contexts, these models support the development of independence as a lived experience rather than an abstract goal. This practice report describes the design and implementation of an immersion experience in Washington, DC, for high school students with visual disabilities. The program was developed to integrate skill application across ECC domains within a complex urban environment, to promote independence, confidence, and readiness for postsecondary life.

Washington, DC Immersion Experience

In response to the need for structured, real-world learning opportunities, a five-night, six-day Washington, DC immersion experience was developed as an intensive transition program for high school students with visual disabilities.

The program included seven students, ages 16-18, accompanied by four staff members from a nonprofit organization serving individuals who are blind or have low vision. The students were juniors and seniors in high school who were enrolled in vocational rehabilitation services through the organization. The group

represented a range of visual functioning, with three students identified as legally blind and four as having low vision. Students had varied visual diagnoses, and some also had additional health-related needs. All seven students had previously completed a five-week residential summer program focused on independent living skills. Furthermore, the students were actively engaged in a year-round transition program that supported postsecondary readiness.

To provide practitioner perspectives on the design and implementation of the immersion experience, information was gathered from three staff members who accompanied the students on the Washington, DC trip. Two staff members participated in individual interviews via Zoom in February 2026, approximately three months after the November 2025 trip. A third staff member, who served in a supervisory role and also accompanied the group, provided additional information about program planning and implementation. To distinguish the sources of quoted reflections while maintaining confidentiality, the two interviewed staff members are identified as Staff 1 and Staff 2 throughout the report. The interviews were not conducted as part of a formal program evaluation; rather, they provided an opportunity for staff to retrospectively reflect on the experience and share practices, challenges, and lessons they believed could be useful to other professionals implementing similar programs.

Washington, DC was selected because of its dense public transportation system, varied terrain, historic infrastructure, and high pedestrian traffic. These features created a complex environment requiring students to navigate unfamiliar systems, manage time and resources, and engage in both social and professional interactions. The selection of this setting was intentional; as Staff 2 explained, "It could be something that would really level up what they're getting right now in high school that would really showcase what adulthood looks like."

Program Design and Preparation

The DC immersion experience was intentionally designed through a structured preparation process that emphasized student readiness, instructional alignment, and logistical planning. Trip-specific planning began approximately five months before departure and included coordinated preparation for both students and staff. This planning was distinct from the students' prior participation in the programs described above.

Student Preparation

Students interested in participating in the DC immersion experience completed an application and interview process to demonstrate their commitment and readiness for the trip. As noted by Staff 1, "They have to fill out an application online on their own, and then they had to schedule an interview time […] It's demonstrating that they are committed to doing it." Approximately three weeks

before departure, students participated in a virtual orientation covering travel expectations, daily routines, budgeting, and technology use.

To support active engagement, each student was assigned both a topic and a navigation role prior to departure. Students researched and prepared brief presentations on selected monuments, museums, or civic topics related to the trip, and each was responsible for leading at least one navigation route during the experience. Pre-trip instruction also included structured role-play to build communication and social interaction skills, including self-introductions, group communication strategies, and professional engagement. All activities were designed to support confidence, leadership, and group dynamics throughout the trip.

Staff Planning and Logistics

Staff preparation focused on designing an environment that balanced safety with opportunities for student independence. The hotel was selected based on proximity to public transportation and access to food to reduce logistical barriers. Staff 2 shared:

> Before booking a hotel, checking ‘Are there good food options a short walking distance from this place?’ I learned from our prior DC trip we were really close to the National Mall, which was where all the cool sightseeing

> types of things were, but there wasn't good food close walking distance to us.

Prior to the trip, staff mapped daily routes using navigation tools to estimate distance, timing, and potential challenges. Staff 2 described her approach to route planning:

> I was actually even using Google Maps to begin to measure out how many miles of walking there would be […] let's make sure we're not walking over 6 miles in a day, because that can get tiring for everybody.

Staff members also proactively contacted museums, venues, and transportation services to identify accessibility features and plan for anticipated barriers. Approximately two weeks before departure, staff coordinated with TSA Cares, a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) program that provides additional assistance to travelers with disabilities and other needs during the airport security screening process. Staff 1 stated:

> I would 100% recommend that you reach out to your TSA Cares if it exists in your airport, just to have the extra hands, just to have somebody else who is aware that you have this group who are traveling together who might need you to tell them more specifically what's going on.

Contingency plans were also developed by staff to address potential disruptions, including weather, closures, and transportation delays.

Instructional Model

Instruction throughout the immersion experience was structured to move students from supported participation to increased independence. As students engaged in the environment, guided practice was implemented through structured prompting and shared planning.

Prior to and upon arrival, staff reviewed key environmental features of the trip, including metro navigation, escalator use, dense pedestrian traffic, and irregular street patterns. Staff 2 shared that each evening during the trip, students presented their assigned topics and one or two students prepared to lead a specific route to one of the following day's destinations. As Staff 2 explained, "One to two students would work with the O&M on a route for tomorrow."

During travel throughout DC, leadership roles rotated, with students responsible for announcing stops, monitoring navigation tools, and communicating transitions. The goal of instruction was not perfect route execution but developing understanding and confidence. As described by Staff 1, "They really like being able to figure out where they are and where they're going, and they want to lead the charge a little bit. And some of them, by the end of the trip, would be leading."

A central feature of the instructional model was the intentional balance between independence and safety. Students were supported while still being expected to take responsibility for decisions. As Staff 1 noted, "They get the most

out of the trip when they're able to really act as if it is a trip that they're doing completely independently without you being there." When uncertainty in navigation arose, instructors used prompting rather than directives, encouraging students to interpret environmental cues and determine next steps independently.

Manageable discomfort was treated as part of the learning process. These experiences supported self-determination by providing opportunities for students to develop self-knowledge about their individual needs and limitations and to practice self-management by making decisions, experiencing their consequences, and adjusting their actions accordingly. Misjudged preparation, underestimated walking distances, or minor budgeting errors prompted reflection for students rather than immediate correction by staff. Staff 1 reflected on a student turning down the recommendation by several staff to wear a thicker jacket, "He was cold all day. He regretted it […] Sometimes for you to learn is like, 'wow, I was really cold because I didn't want to wear my bulky jacket because I didn't want to look uncool'."

As the week progressed, staff observed students taking greater responsibility for navigation, budgeting, and time management. Through calibrated supervision and progressive release of responsibility, the instructional model helped ensure that the challenges of the environment translated into meaningful learning. Students were not only practicing skills; they were engaging in the decision-making,

accountability, and problem-solving required for independent participation in adult environments.

Orientation and Mobility in Action

Orientation and mobility instruction remained central to the immersion experience. Unlike structured or campus-based routes, Washington, DC required real-time navigation across varied terrain, transportation systems, and dense pedestrian environments.

Metro Navigation

While using the Washington Metro, students practiced skills by interpreting information on multiple lines, confirming directionality, managing escalators, and monitoring the progression of stops. For many students, this was their first experience with an underground metro system. As Staff 1 described:

> I think one thing the students really loved about the Metro was watching how many professional people were on the Metro living their lives just like a normal person going to work. They'd be like, 'I just can't believe that person is just going to work, and that's their way of getting to work.'

Students used applications such as Google Maps and the DC Transit App, along with auditory announcements and tactile signage, to verify route accuracy. Instructors monitored safety but intervened only when necessary, allowing students to maintain responsibility for navigation decisions.

Street and Pedestrian Travel

Above ground, students navigated irregular street patterns, high-traffic intersections, and inconsistent accessibility features. Historic districts featured uneven surfaces, such as cobblestone streets, which required adjustments in cane technique and pacing. Staff 2 noted:

> We were walking a little bit slower, and the students were really working on, 'Okay, I'm kind of switching up my cane technique to really make sure that I'm walking in step because I really don't want to hit a crack and fall over.'

Endurance and Environmental Variability

Students walked an average of five to six miles per day, encountering gravel paths, construction detours, and dense pedestrian congestion. These conditions required sustained attention and flexibility when navigating the city. Environmental variability reinforced the need for ongoing environmental assessment and adjustment. As noted by Staff 2, "Navigating stairs that aren't necessarily ADA compliant, that are really short and long, or are really not so wide and very steep, and just kind of learning to really use their cane to measure everything that they're encountering tactually." Through these experiences, students strengthened route planning, ongoing environmental analysis, and navigation accuracy in real-world settings.

Independent Living and Self-Determination in Context

In addition to mobility, the immersion experience emphasized independent living and self-determination through daily responsibilities embedded in the natural environment. Students managed personal needs, made decisions, and advocated for themselves across contexts.

Air Travel and Advocacy

Navigating a major airport provided opportunities to practice independent travel skills. Students identified themselves to gate agents, requested pre-boarding when appropriate, coordinated with TSA Cares, and managed carry-on luggage while using a cane. They independently tracked flight information and monitored boarding announcements, reinforcing their self-advocacy skills and all that is involved in travel planning. Staff 2 stated, “That was [students’] responsibility, to be able to have access to their ticket versus just being handed a printed version. So, they learned how to actually get that up on their phone.”

Hotel Living Skills

Students navigated hotel environments, oriented themselves to room layouts, identified emergency exits, and practiced stairwell access. Staff 2 shared:

> We did O&M around the hotel, being familiar with where's the exit in case of a fire, where's the stairwell, and we practiced with each student getting to that point, walking through the stairs, getting to the ground floor, and

> knowing how to get out of the building in case, because each student had their own room.

Evening routines required time management, medication management, device charging, and preparation for the following day.

Budgeting and Decision-Making

Meals required financial planning and decision-making. Students worked within a spending limit, reviewed menus, calculated costs, and made purchasing decisions. They placed orders independently, communicated their preferences, and completed transactions. Staff 1 shared:

> Sometimes that means they work together. For some of them, they were like, 'Well, we want to try a bunch of appetizers. So, we're going to pool our money, and we're going to do a bunch of appetizers.' That kind of independence of, 'We want to all do this together. How much can we spend?' Which is awesome.

When challenges arose, students were guided through problem-solving rather than given immediate solutions.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Although the DC immersion experience was carefully planned, the complexity of the setting revealed several challenges that informed future refinement.

Physical fatigue emerged as a factor influencing student performance and pacing. Daily walking distances, cold temperatures, and sustained cognitive engagement required stamina beyond what some students anticipated. As Staff 2 reflected:

> I think I would add in more time for just exploring the National Mall. We kind of chunked it into this tightly bound time. But allowing for more time for transition […] if we need to sit down for two hours for a lunch break, that's ok.

This insight highlights the importance of incorporating flexible pacing and intentional downtime to support endurance and overall student engagement.

Structured reflection also proved to be a critical component of the learning process. Students reconvened each evening to share presentations, reflect on their experiences, and identify both successes and challenges from the day. As Staff 1 noted, this created space for students to share "their experience of the day" while also learning from one another's perspectives. These reflective discussions reinforced skill development while strengthening peer connections and a sense of community. Incorporating intentional debriefing supported both skill consolidation and peer support.

In addition, the experience highlighted the importance of distributing instructional responsibility among staff to support both program quality and

sustainability. While the trip was successfully implemented, leadership and decision-making often defaulted to the primary coordinator. In future iterations, assigning staff to lead specific components (e.g., airport logistics, museum navigation, daily itineraries) may promote more balanced facilitation and reduce fatigue. This approach also ensures that students engage with multiple instructors, rather than relying on a single point of leadership.

Conclusion

The Washington, DC immersion experience demonstrates how intentionally designed, community-based programming can extend transition instruction beyond classroom simulation into authentic participation. This experience ultimately engaged students across all areas of the ECC, including:

- sensory efficiency for environmental awareness and use of technology
- compensatory skills for planning travel, outings, and meals
- independent living skills for medication management and personal hygiene
- social skills for public transit and peer engagement
- recreation and leisure through museum visits, learning about history, developing stamina, and fitness for walking
- self-determination in getting to know oneself, managing emotions and bodily needs, perseverance, and self-efficacy skills

- orientation and mobility for navigating unfamiliar transportation systems and environments

Authentic, community-based environments required students to draw upon these skills simultaneously as they navigated transportation systems, managed personal needs and resources, interacted with others, and made decisions within an unfamiliar environment.

For practitioners seeking to develop similar programs, several elements appeared important to implementation. Intentional pre-trip preparation established expectations and supported student readiness through research assignments, technology use, role-play activities, and preparation for student-led navigation. Assigning students meaningful responsibilities, such as leading designated routes, managing budgets, presenting information, and participating in travel decisions, promoted active participation rather than passive attendance. Staff also balanced safety with opportunities for students to problem-solve and experience manageable challenges, using prompting and guided reflection rather than immediately providing solutions. Structured reflection provided opportunities for students to process their experiences, learn from decisions and their consequences, and consider how these experiences related to greater independence.

Student growth was supported not by exposure alone, but through a structured instructional approach that emphasized gradual transfer of

responsibility, calibrated safety, and ongoing reflection. As students moved from supported participation toward more independent navigation and decision-making, staff observed greater confidence, problem-solving, and willingness to self-advocate within unfamiliar environments.

These outcomes reinforce existing research identifying community mobility skills and transportation self-efficacy as factors associated with employment among individuals with visual disabilities (Cmar, 2015; Cmar et al., 2018), as well as research documenting the complex information, planning, and orientation demands associated with navigating unfamiliar environments (Müller et al., 2022). The development of independence can be supported through integrated, real-world application of ECC skills (Fundelius, 2025).

As transition programs seek to prepare youth with visual disabilities for postsecondary education, employment, and community life, immersive models such as this offer a practical and replicable framework for integrating ECC instruction within authentic environments. Such experiences do not necessarily require travel to Washington, DC; similar opportunities can be developed within local communities when intentionally designed to incorporate authentic demands in transportation, budgeting, communication, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. For transition specialists and O&M professionals, this model highlights the value of creating community-based experiences that require students to integrate skills

across ECC domains rather than practice them in isolation. Future program development should consider how these experiences can be adapted to available local resources while providing students with opportunities to encounter manageable challenges, evaluate their own needs, and practice the self-management and problem-solving skills required for adult life.

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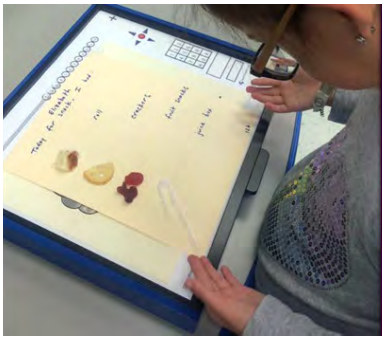
Education Specialist Credential in Visual Impairment

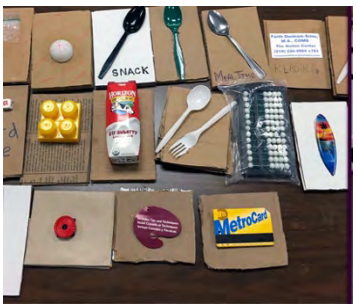
The Education Specialist Credential Program in Visual Impairment (VI) prepares highly qualified educators to teach and empower a diverse range of blind and low vision students aged birth to 22 and their families. Our program prepares educators to bridge current evidence-based literature with practice-orientated instructional strategies that are focused on promoting students' access to core and expanded core curriculum areas, while emphasizing barrier-free membership in school, home, and community settings. We commit to exercising culturally responsive pedagogy as aligned with principles of anti-racism and anti-ableism. Candidates are expected to demonstrate skills in working with an array of professionals as well as families in order to facilitate learner participation and growth within the context of their educational experience.

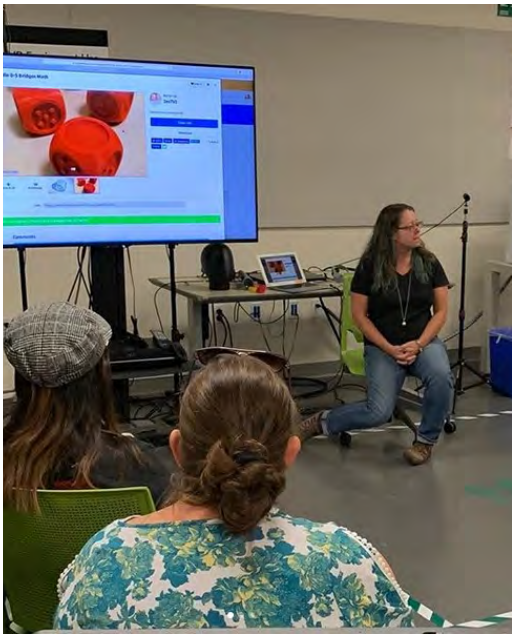
Graduates from our program:

- Demonstrate competence in assessment and instruction to promote functional literacy in braille, print and auditory methodologies
- Have skills in collaborating with an array of professionals as well as families In order to facilitate learner participation and growth
- Participate in field assignments that include diverse populations, and issues related to the effects of cultural and linguistic differences
- Demonstrate knowledge and skills regarding the effects of adventitious and congenital visual impairments as well as the impact of various conditions on learning and development









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Students as Leaders: Strategies for Student-Driven Transition Planning

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Abstract

Transition planning offers a critical opportunity for students with disabilities to develop self-determination and agency, skills essential for positive in-school and post-school outcomes. Yet many students who are blind and have low vision remain passive participants in their own transition planning processes. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition planning process is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) as an individualized and coordinated set of services that prepares students for their postsecondary goals. This practitioner article presents practical, actionable strategies for empowering transition-aged students (14–22) across three of those components: transition

assessment, the development of measurable postsecondary and annual goals, and the selection of transition services and a course of study. Drawing on transition research and informed by the lived experiences of high school students with vision loss, this practitioner article highlights how meaningful student involvement is both feasible and transformative, shifting students from spectators to leaders in their own IEPs and strengthening their self-advocacy and post-school trajectories.

Zoe is a high school student who is blind. She understands her visual impairment well and can clearly explain which accommodations help her learn. During her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings in middle school, she consistently introduced herself, shared some of her thoughts, and felt her input was valued. But, when her case manager asked her whether she wanted to lead her own IEP meeting now that she was in high school, the idea made her nervous, and she declined. The nerves were real, but they grew out of uncertainty, not inability. No one had explained what leading a meeting would involve, and without being able to envision the process, the role felt impossible to assume. So, she did what she had always done: she participated when asked and let the adults in the room steer. Prior to the meeting, she completed transition assessments, without realizing what they were or being told how the results would shape her goals or services.

Because some assessments were not available in an accessible format, her teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI) usually read the assessments aloud to her, which she appreciated. But this small act quietly reminded Zoe how different her experience was from that of her sighted peers. Zoe was present in her planning. She was capable. But she was not leading the planning decisions for her future.

Zoe's experience is not unusual. Students with disabilities, including those who are blind or have low vision (B/LV), frequently function as passive participants in their IEP and transition planning meetings rather than as informed decision-makers (Hetherington et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2006). Recent data indicate that only 15% of elementary students, 30% of middle school students, and 68% of high school students attend their IEP meetings at all (Sanderson & Goldman, 2022), let alone participate. For more than two decades, observational studies have found students speak during their own meetings as little as 3% (Martin et al., 2006) to 13% of the time (Landmark & Zhang, 2019), and fewer than half of attending students reported feeling able to offer even some input (Wagner et al., 2012). As a result, many experience these meetings as confusing, exclusionary, or even anxiety-provoking, with minimal understanding of their own role (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Munsell & Schwartz, 2022; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014).

Active engagement in transition planning is not a courtesy; it is how students who are B/LV build self-determination. Acting as the causal agent in one's own life in service of goals selected through informed choice, self-determination is among the strongest predictors of positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Chambless et al., 2019; Lund & Cmar, 2020; Mazzotti et al., 2021), and the IEP transition planning process is itself a place to learn and practice these skills (Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013). Federal law has long assumed that students belong in their own planning meetings, requiring IEP transition planning to begin no later than age 16, and students must be invited to any IEP meeting where transition is discussed (IDEA, 2004). Yet, as Zoe's story illustrates, invitation and attendance are where involvement often stops. Goal setting in schools remains largely teacher-directed for students with disabilities (Shogren & Raley, 2022; Van Dycke et al., 2006), and students who are B/LV face the added barrier of experiencing inaccessible materials often used to facilitate self-determined planning (e.g., transition assessments, student-led IEP presentations). Genuine self-determination requires more than a seat at the table. It requires that students understand and drive decisions.

Understanding IEP Transition Planning: A Framework for Student Involvement

Before students can lead their transition-focused IEP meeting, they need to understand the structure of a transition-focused IEP. The IEP is a legally required and enforceable document with distinct, interconnected components that provide opportunities for meaningful student input. Educators who take time to explain the purpose and structure of the IEP in plain language lay the foundation for genuine involvement; students cannot lead a process they do not understand.

Under IDEA (2004), a compliant IEP transition plan for students 16 and older (14 in many states, and 12 in Florida) must include: (1) measurable postsecondary goals driven by transition assessment that focus on education/training, employment, and independent living, as appropriate; (2) transition services to support those goals; (3) a course of study aligned with the student's goals; and (4) measurable annual goals that build toward the student's postsecondary goals. Table 1 defines each component and describes how B/LV students can participate meaningfully.

In the sections that follow, the authors elaborate on each component: transition assessment, the development of Measurable Postsecondary Goals and Measurable Annual Goals, and the selection of transition services and a course of study. Throughout, we provide ideas for leveraging formal and informal supports

to equip B/LV students to grow into leadership across four stages: (1) informed attendance with understanding of the agenda and having come prepared to share; (2) contributing a defined section of the meeting; (3) co-leading with structured supports (e.g., the Self-Directed IEP; Martin et al., 2006); and (4) leading the agenda themselves. Asking a student to "lead" without preparation or support, as Zoe experienced, almost guarantees a "no," but gradually building their capacity to lead over time can ensure success.

Table 1

Components of the Transition-Focused IEP and Opportunities for Student Involvement

IEP Component	Definition	B/LV students can meaningfully participate by
Transition Assessment	Formal and informal measures of preferences, interests, skills, and support needs	Helping to select accessible assessment tools; participating in assessments; reviewing and interpreting results; identifying gaps between current and desired skills
Measurable Postsecondary Goals	Measurable goals for education, employment, and independent living after high school	Drafting goals in own words; align goals to personal vision
Measurable Annual Goals	Yearly skill targets that bridge current performance and postsecondary goal attainment	Identifying priority skills needed to achieve postsecondary goals; tracking goal progress
Course of Study	A list of all courses to be taken in high school, aligned with postsecondary goals	Researching available courses and programs; understanding how class choices connect to postsecondary options

Transition Services	Specific services, activities, and agency linkages to support goal attainment	Identifying service providers; participate in agency meetings; taking ownership of transition services at home or in the community

Transition Assessment

Transition assessment is the ongoing process of gathering information about a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs to inform postsecondary goals and services (IDEA, 2004). It is often a student's first formal entry point into transition planning, which makes it an ideal place to begin building ownership. When students can fully access a transition assessment with an understanding of why they are completing the assessment and how the results will be used, the assessment becomes a tool they use rather than a task completed for them.

As an 8th-grade student, Zoe completed transition assessments, but she did not always understand their purpose or how the information was being used. In some cases, she did not even realize she was completing an assessment that would inform her transition plan. She was told to fill out forms or answer questions so her team could better understand her needs, but the larger purpose was rarely explained. Because some assessments were not available in an accessible format, her teacher often read the questions aloud to her. She appreciated the support, but the experience felt different from how her sighted peers completed the same activity and required dependence on adults for her to identify and document her own goals and preferences. Looking back, Zoe realized that full accessibility

encompasses the opportunity to review an assessment independently with a clear understanding of its purpose, as such would have allowed her to engage more meaningfully in her IEP transition planning.

Practical Strategies for Student-Centered Assessment

- Review Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) assessment data to identify transition-related need areas.
- Involve the student in choosing which assessments to use.
- Complete transition assessments well before the IEP meeting, allowing students to review and discuss results with team members in advance so the meeting focuses on decision-making rather than simply reporting data.
- Tell students explicitly when they are completing a transition assessment, what it measures, how the results will help shape goals and services, and when they will have the opportunity to discuss the findings.
- Offer braille, large print, or screen-reader-compatible digital versions so students who are B/LV can complete assessments themselves rather than relying on a reader and scribe.
- Pair standardized inventories with interviews, interest surveys, and situational assessments to help students recognize their own preferences in the data. Collectively, assessments should gather comprehensive information

from multiple perspectives and highlight both formal school-based services and informal family and community supports.

- Collect assessment data from students, their parents/guardians, and educational staff. Have the student reconcile their own self-ratings against parent/staff ratings, identifying discrepancies to foster conversations about self-awareness.
- Help students interpret their results and show them, concretely, how each finding connects to a goal or service. Have students identify patterns in their assessment results and discuss whether the results align with their perceptions of their strengths, interests, and support needs.
- Build a cumulative learner profile that the student updates each year, so repeated assessments can highlight how their insights change over time

Most assessments were not designed to be accessible. Therefore, it is the role of the TSVI to ensure access. This can mean contacting the publisher to advocate for an accessible version, re-creating a PDF assessment in a Microsoft Word or Google Doc, or reading aloud an assessment, with the student's permission.

Table 2

Sample Free Employment-Focused Transition Assessments

Assessment Name	Brief Description	Accessibility Considerations
O*Net Interest Profiler (https://onetinterestprofiler.org/)	This assessment includes 30-work related tasks that require users to respond to a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly dislike, 5 = strongly like). Results identify scores in each of the 6 vocational interest areas (RIASEC). Users have access to career suggestions based on their responses and can learn more about each vocational interest area.	• Statements can be accessed with specific keyboard crd commands. Answers can be selected with spacebar. • User is not notified about which choice was selected. • Some images are unlabeled. • Visual showing RIASEC results is not accessible. • Users must navigate to "save or share your profile" link on the results page to access raw scores in an accessible format. • Linked career suggestions are generally accessible.
ACTE: Career Interest Survey: Cluster-by-Cluster Edition (https://careertech.org/resourcecenter/series/career-interest-surveys/cluster-by-cluster-career-interest-survey/)	This assessment consists of 16 sections, with each including 3 sub-sections: things I like to do, words that describe me, and problems I want to solve in the world. Students select the statements	• This assessment is accessible to screen readers and enlarging software. • The emailed results are accessible. • The webpage does not save results. • Overall directions are good, but guidance is

	that describe them and calculate the total number in each section to identify the career cluster that best align with their preferences and interests.	needed on what to do if several categories have the same score or how to quickly get to the *Career Cluster List-Start Exploring!* Heading level. (WCAG 2.1 Success Criterion 3.3.2: Labels or Instructions). • Images had alt text. • Some color contrast issues (but there is a widget where you can change the colors).
CareerOneStop Work Values Assessment (https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/Careers/work-values-matcher.aspx)	Users sort value statements into 5 categories. Results show 6 categories of work values and raw scores. Users can explore a list of careers related to each work value.	• Users can navigate with screen readers. • Users are notified how many spaces are available in each level of importance section. • The results graphic is screen reader navigable! • Additional information about each category is provided in an accessible format.

Goal Development

Measurable postsecondary goals state what the student will do after high school; Measurable annual goals are the yearly goals and objectives that build toward them (IDEA, 2004). Together, these goals are the heart of the transition-

focused IEP, and they are where student-driven planning matters most. Goal setting in schools tends to be teacher-directed for students with disabilities (Shogren & Raley, 2022; Van Dycke et al., 2006), yet goals that originate from the student's own vision are more motivating and more likely to be pursued (Howard et al., 2021; Mazzotti et al., 2021). Teaching students to set and monitor their own goals is itself a core skill area within self-determination (Shogren & Raley, 2022).

Thinking about the future, Zoe planned to attend college after graduation. But she was not sure what specific goals she should work on while in high school to help her get there. Zoe's TSVI asked her to talk through any challenges she experiences in her classes. Zoe immediately replied that she had been having trouble with revising her written work because her teachers used commenting and tracked revision features that were not compatible with her screen reader. As a result, Zoe explained how she had difficulty independently reviewing feedback and demonstrating her revisions. Zoe's TSVI validated these feelings of frustration and engaged Zoe in a broader conversation about the technology, problem-solving, and self-advocacy skills Zoe would need at college. As a result, Zoe and her TSVI drafted goals focused on independently reviewing instructor feedback on written assignments and using accessible technology tools to complete revisions that they planned to discuss with the larger IEP team. Through this process, Zoe learned

that sharing her experiences and priorities can help shape the goals and services in her IEP.

Practical Strategies for Student-Centered Goal Setting

- Ask students to identify challenges they are currently experiencing in school, home, or community settings and discuss how those experiences might inform annual goals. Then, root their goals in their strengths.
- Teach the student using a structured goal-setting framework to teach students processes to set goals for the rest of their lives (Shogren & Raley, 2022).
- Develop measurable postsecondary goals using data from the student's unique transition assessment results, rather than allowing the educational team's assumptions about what is possible to shape the student's program. Aim high while ensuring that family and community values are considered to produce contextually relevant plans.
- Develop a list of potential measurable annual goals based on the student's assessment data and post-school goals and have the student rank which measurable annual goals matter most to them.
- Ensure measurable annual goals remain compliant with IDEA requirements while also being explained in language that students and families can

understand. Ensure students understand that objectives build up to annual goals.

- Support students in reviewing goal progress throughout the year and revising goals during annual transition planning as interests, priorities, and postsecondary aspirations evolve.
- Teach students to track their own progress using visual/tactile graphs, digital tools, checklists, or reflection logs, and use the data to evaluate whether current goals and supports continue to align with their postsecondary aspirations.

Selecting Transition Services and the Course of Study

Transition services are the coordinated instruction and experiences that move a student toward their measurable postsecondary goals, and the course of study is the multi-year plan of classes that supports them (IDEA, 2004). Transition services and the course of study are where individualization is most visible. Services address key domain areas (e.g., instruction, community experiences, employment preparation, daily living skills) but should reflect the individual's specific measurable postsecondary goals. Transition services for a student who is B/LV might include assistive technology training, O&M instruction, linkages to state rehabilitation services for the blind, and self-advocacy instruction, including

how to disclose a disability and request accommodations in college or at the workplace.

Educators should ensure that students who are B/LV are informed about and encouraged to participate in all opportunities associated with their course of study. This discussion should include a conversation about available career and technical education (CTE) courses, elective courses, internships, dual enrollment courses, or Pre-Employment Transition Services.

As Zoe began thinking about life after high school, she knew she wanted to continue her education but wasn't sure which path would best prepare her for it. During transition planning discussions, her IEP team walked her through several options, including graduating on a standard timeline or entering an 18-22 transition program connected to the local community college. Rather than simply accepting a recommendation, Zoe asked what each option would look like and how the coursework and supports differed. As she learned more, she realized the transition program would let her build a course of study during high school that would prepare her for the community college's offerings while continuing to receive the transition services she would need to access them: orientation and mobility instruction to navigate an unfamiliar campus, assistive technology training, and supported employment experiences. With her team, Zoe mapped which courses she would take each year, identified transition services to support

her in her goal of entering the transition program, and named who would arrange each service and when. Through the process, she learned that planning was not about adults deciding what came next, but about understanding her options, asking questions, and shaping the path toward her future.

Practical Strategies for Long-Term Planning

- Support students in selecting the specific services that fit their measurable postsecondary goals and access needs. Consider all the skills and experiences a student might need to acquire now to better meet their post-school goals (e.g., financial literacy, home management, medication management, time management, development of soft skills, etc.), as well as related services they can connect to for after graduation.
- Provide students with examples of diverse transition services that reflect both formal disability services as well as informal supports in their community. In order for students to know what is possible, you need to become aware!
- Assign ownership: for each service, have the student name who is responsible for ensuring it happens, how, and at what time within the next year.
- Have students weigh in on courses and electives they want to take, linking what they take now and where they are headed explicitly. Build a multi-year

course map that the student helps fill in, drawing the line from each elective to the postsecondary goal.

- Rather than limiting students due to safety concerns or predetermined notions of what is possible, act creatively in crafting opportunities that honor their voice, even if through partial participation (e.g., auditing a CTE course at a community college).

A Four-Stage Progression Toward Student-Led Transition Planning

Leadership of IEP transition planning is not a separate component of the IEP nor something that begins in the senior year of high school. Rather, such capacity consists of knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy that develop over time and across many meetings, warranting a deliberate plan of its own. The four stages to grow into leadership introduced earlier in this article provide educators with shared language for meeting students where they are at and moving them one step further each year.

Students will arrive at their IEP meetings with different capacity levels and will progress at different rates. That's expected! The aim is for every student to advance in their IEP leadership every year, and to never be asked to do more than they have been prepared to do. To ensure that students have the support they need, make sure that they have a menu of options for enacting their leadership, rather than following a cookie-cutter progression. Below are some ideas for what the four

stages can look like, with examples of how to scaffold support to enable students to progress between stages.

- **Informed attendance.** The student receives the agenda in advance, knows who must attend and why, gets to invite persons of their choosing (e.g., coaches, mentors, outside agency representatives, etc.), and arrives ready to share a strength, preference, and/or a goal. *To expand on previous participation:* Give the student a single recurring item to present, such as a learner profile built during the transition assessment process.
- **Contributing a section.** The student presents a defined portion of the meeting, such as their measurable postsecondary goals or progress on one of their goals, using supports of their preference (e.g., slides, pre-recordings, an accessible script). *To expand on previous participation:* Expand the student's portion across successive meetings and have them field a question.
- **Co-leading with support.** Using a structured process, such as the Self-Directed IEP (Martin et al., 2006; Van Dycke et al., 2006), the student begins the meeting, states its purpose, introduces the team, and walks through several agenda items with staff ready to step in. *To expand on previous participation:* Fade the adult support deliberately, planning with the student the prompts you will withhold at future meetings.

- **Leading.** The student runs the agenda, invites input from each team member, and closes the meeting, with adults participating and supporting rather than directing (Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013; Kucharczyk et al., 2022).

Like the IEP itself, student leadership should be individualized across planning. A student who is B/LV may lead from a braille or screen-reader-ready agenda, present slides built with accessible templates, and practice with the assistive technology they will use in the room. Rehearsing or even recording portions beforehand, reviewing any script they create, anticipating questions, and testing the technology transforms an intimidating role into a familiar one.

Conclusion

The freshman who declined to lead her IEP meeting and the young adult who confidently directs it are the same student. What changed for Zoe was not her ability but the scaffolding the adults around her provided: assessments she could access and understand independently, goals built from her own vision, and services she helped select and learned to advocate for. The transition process does not need to be reinvented for a student who is B/LV; it needs to be individualized to their support needs and genuinely co-developed with them. This work is feasible within the meetings school staff are already required to hold and the processes they must already follow. Intentionality is what shifts students who are B/LV from spectators

to leaders, one step at a time, from informed attendance to directing the meeting. And because self-advocacy, a skill area within self-determination, develops through practice, every meeting a student helps lead becomes preparation for the decisions that will shape their adult life.

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AI Tools for Vision Loss

Presented by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Division on Visual Impairments and Deafblindness (DVIDB)

Speaker: Dr. Krystle Merry, Assistant Professor at the University of Maine, AI Trainer, and UX/UI Designer

Session Description

This session explores leading AI-powered tools that support people with vision loss in accessing information, navigating environments, interpreting visual content, and completing everyday tasks. Participants will examine practical applications of computer vision, image description, text recognition, conversational AI, and wearable technologies. The session will also address limitations, privacy considerations, accuracy concerns, and the importance of matching tools to an individual's goals and preferences.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify leading AI-powered accessibility tools for people with vision loss.
2. Describe how AI features such as object recognition, visual interpretation, and conversational assistance can be applied in educational, professional, and daily life.
3. Evaluate AI accessibility tools using considerations including usability, reliability, privacy, cost, and user choice.

Event Information

- Date: November 17
- Time: 4:30-5:30 PM EST
- Format: Virtual via Zoom. Register for Zoom access.
- Rates: CEC Members are free. Non-members are $20 plus Eventbrite fee. Group rates are available for $200 plus Eventbrite fee.
- Registration Link here or go to tinyurl.com/aiforvisionloss

Preparing for the Future: The Value of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the Importance of Early Connection

Elaine Mara, APH, elainemaratvi@gmail.com

The Blind Spot in K-12 Education: Why We Must Look Beyond the Diploma

Graduation day is a moment of profound pride, but for educators and families walking beside a student with a visual impairment, it often carries a quiet, lingering anxiety: "Are they truly ready for what comes next?" Students receive a high school diploma as a symbol of success yet are confronted by a sobering statistical reality. Working-age adults who are blind or have low vision (BLV) face staggering rates of un- or underemployment (McDonnall & Sui, 2018; McDonnall & McKnight, 2021), not because they lack capability, but because the system that prepared them often stops at the graduation stage (Botsford, 2013; Cmar, 2015; Cmar & Antonelli, 2026).

One might assume that the root of this disconnect likely lies within the traditional K-12 silo. In the daily rush to master braille, achieve screen-reader proficiency, and keep pace with a rigorous core curriculum, long-term vocational foresight easily gets pushed to the periphery. Far too often, transition planning is

treated as a superficial 11th-12th grade checklist item rather than an evolving, intentional continuum that begins the moment a child enters school.

To bridge the gap between the classroom and the career, we must look beyond the diploma and recognize that true educational equity means preparing students not just to graduate, but to thrive in adulthood. Overcoming this oversight requires a fundamental shift in how we view the role of the TSVI (Spungin et al., 2017). Traditionally, TSVIs have been positioned as academic support providers, focusing on braille literacy, assistive technology, access to curriculum, and compensatory skills. While these responsibilities remain essential, they represent only part of what students need to succeed after graduation.

Checklists to Intentional Construction

Today's TSVIs are uniquely positioned to serve as early career-path architects. Like architects who design a structure long before construction begins, TSVIs help students build the foundation for future educational, vocational, and independent living success years before major transition decisions are made. This role extends beyond teaching skills to intentionally creating connections. It includes introducing students to vocational rehabilitation agencies, facilitating relationships with blind adults and mentors, exposing students to diverse career pathways, helping families understand available resources, and ensuring that

students develop an awareness of the systems that will support them throughout adulthood.

Viewed through this lens, transition is not a service that begins in high school. It is a developmental process that starts early and evolves over time. Each interaction, career conversation, agency referral, community experience, and family partnership becomes part of a larger blueprint that helps students envision and prepare for their future. The ultimate goal is not simply to help students earn a diploma, but to ensure they leave school connected to the people, resources, and opportunities that will help them navigate a lifetime of transitions.

My Educational Story: Well-Prepared, Yet Underprepared

Looking back on my K-12 experience, it would be difficult to argue that I was inadequately prepared for adulthood. I was fortunate to have a dedicated case manager who helped me develop self-advocacy skills, navigate academic expectations, and envision a future beyond high school. By most measures, I appeared ready for the next chapter. Yet one critical component of the transition process was absent. Throughout my elementary and secondary education, I never learned about vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, nor was I connected with an agency that would ultimately become one of the most important resources in my adult life.

The College Reality Check

When I arrived on my college campus, I believed I was prepared for the transition to adulthood. I had developed a strong academic foundation, learned to advocate for myself, and successfully navigated a rigorous K-12 education. Yet within my first interaction with university support systems, I discovered a significant gap in my preparation: I knew nothing about the blindness-specific services and resources available to support me. One of my earliest meetings was with the university's disability services office. During a conversation with the Accessibility (ADA) Coordinator, she asked what should have been simple questions: Was I connected with VR Agencies? What assistive technology did I use in school? What services was I currently receiving? I was completely unprepared to answer. I had never heard of VR. I had no understanding of the role state agencies play in supporting BLV individuals as they pursue education and employment. While I had access to technology throughout my schooling, I lacked the broader context to discuss assistive technology as part of a long-term educational and career pathway. What the ADA coordinator assumed was common knowledge for a college-bound student with a visual impairment was entirely unfamiliar territory to me.

As I began exploring career planning resources toward the end of my undergraduate career, I encountered another challenge. Although the university career center was equipped to support the general student population, there

appeared to be limited experience advising students with visual impairments. Questions related to accessibility, workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and blindness-specific employment resources often led back to disability services rather than career development. I quickly realized that the traditional campus support structure was not designed to address many of the unique employment considerations faced by BLV students. For the first time, I found myself navigating a complex transition with little awareness of the specialized supports available to help me succeed. The issue was not a lack of motivation or readiness to learn. Rather, it was a lack of exposure. Throughout my K-12 education, no one had connected me with the systems and agencies that existed specifically to support my transition from student to professional.

Discovering Vocational Rehabilitation: Finding the Missing Piece

My introduction to VR did not come through transition planning, career exploration, or employment preparation. In fact, it emerged from a moment of vulnerability. During my first years of college, I was navigating campus and community travel independently, but the demands of an unfamiliar environment exposed limitations in my orientation and mobility skills that I had never fully recognized. One evening, while walking home from the campus library after dark, I narrowly avoided being struck by a car. Although I escaped unharmed, the experience profoundly affected my confidence.

In the months that followed, I found myself traveling less often and becoming increasingly hesitant to venture beyond familiar routes. The loss of confidence extended beyond academics. Activities that had once felt routine became sources of anxiety, and my social life gradually diminished as I became less comfortable navigating independently after dark or in unfamiliar environments. For the first time, I realized that success in college required more than academic preparation. It required the skills, supports, and confidence necessary to participate fully in campus life.

It was through this experience that I was introduced to VR services. Rather than focusing on employment, my initial connection centered on restoring independence. Through orientation and mobility training, I gained the tools, skills, and confidence needed to travel safely and navigate my environment more effectively. What began as a response to a mobility challenge quickly became an introduction to a broader network of blindness-specific supports that I had never encountered before. As I continued my education, VR's role in my life expanded. The agency provided financial assistance that helped me pursue my first master's degree and opened doors to opportunities that might otherwise have been inaccessible. More importantly, I began to understand VR not as a single service, but as an ongoing partnership supporting educational, professional, and personal growth.

Over the years, that partnership evolved alongside my career. At different points, VR assisted with technology and mobility needs as I navigated new professional roles and changing environments. When I later returned to school to earn my teaching credentials and become a TSVI, connecting with the Florida Division of Blind Services was among the first steps I took. Having experienced the value of these services firsthand, I understood their importance and sought support immediately. Through the agency, I received financial assistance for my educational program, orientation and mobility services on campus, an upgraded iPad to support my coursework, and later orientation and mobility training as I transitioned into my first full-time teaching position.

Looking back, what stands out most is not simply the assistance I received, but how long it took me to discover that these services existed. VR ultimately became one of the most significant sources of support in my educational and professional journey. However, I did not learn about it through a transition plan, a career exploration activity, or a school-based referral. I found it only after encountering challenges that might have been addressed much earlier through proactive connection and guidance.

The Missed Opportunity

I do not view my experience as a story of educational failure. In many respects, my educational team prepared me well. I learned to advocate for myself,

achieved academic success, and entered adulthood with confidence in my ability to pursue higher education. The professionals who supported me were dedicated, caring, and committed to my success. **What was missing was not effort; it was connection.**

The greatest irony of my transition experience is that many of the supports that would later shape my education, independence, and career were available all along. VR services, orientation and mobility instruction beyond the school setting, assistive technology resources, and specialized transition supports existed within my community. Despite their availability, I was never connected to these services during my K-12 years. What became one of the most valuable partnerships in my educational experience emerged not through intentional transition planning, but as a response to crisis.

The missed opportunity extended beyond delayed access to services or funding. It was a delayed introduction to information, relationships, and possibilities. Earlier involvement with VR could have connected me to blindness-specific resources, strengthened my orientation and mobility skills before difficulties arose, expanded my understanding of assistive technology, and broadened my awareness of potential career pathways. More importantly, it could have reinforced a lesson I later learned firsthand: success after graduation depends on more than academic achievement. It requires knowing how to navigate the

systems, supports, and partnerships that foster long-term independence and employment.

My experience raises an important question for today's TSVIs and transition professionals: How many capable students graduate with strong academic foundations but little awareness of the resources available to support them beyond high school? When connections to VR and other adult-service partners occur only after significant barriers emerge, opportunities for proactive planning may be lost. For TSVIs and other professionals supporting BLV students, the goal is not simply to prepare students for graduation. It is to ensure they leave school with both the skills and the knowledge of who their partners will be in the next chapter of their lives.

From Transition Planning to Career-Path Architecture

As a former student, I do not wish I had received more instruction. I wish I had received earlier connections. Earlier exposure and collaboration could have transformed my understanding of what was possible and provided a roadmap for navigating adulthood with greater confidence. In reflecting on my experience, several key opportunities for connection stand out.

Introducing Vocational Rehabilitation Before High School

My first exposure to VR occurred after I had already encountered significant challenges in college. Looking back, an earlier introduction would not necessarily

have changed my educational trajectory, but it would have expanded my awareness of the resources, services, and support systems available beyond high school. My experience highlights the value of helping students and families become familiar with VR before they reach traditional transition milestones. Early exposure can help students understand that support systems exist beyond the school environment and may be available throughout their career trajectory.

Making Career Conversations Routine

Throughout my K-12 experience, discussions about the future often emphasized academic achievement and postsecondary education. While those conversations were valuable, they rarely included topics like workplace accommodations, assistive technology in college and professional settings, or the laws, agencies, and resources that support employment outcomes for BLV people. My experience suggests that career development conversations may be most effective when they are woven throughout a student's educational experience rather than concentrated during the final years of high school. Regular discussions can help students connect classroom learning to future educational, employment, and independent living goals.

Building Agency Partnerships

My experience highlights the value of sustained collaboration between schools and community agencies. When students meet agency personnel and

become familiar with available services before graduation, they are better positioned to navigate future transitions.

This experience underscores the potential value of ongoing collaboration between schools and community agencies. When students encounter agency personnel, services, and programs before graduation, they have opportunities to become familiar with resources that may support them during future transitions.

Connecting Families to Available Resources

Like many students, I relied on the adults around me to help identify opportunities and available supports. Because VR was never a significant part of my transition planning, neither I nor my family had a clear understanding of the services available to support my educational and career goals. My experience illustrates the importance of ensuring that families have access to information about available resources and service providers. Informed families are often better positioned to help students navigate transitions and make connections that extend beyond the school years.

Viewing Transition as a Continuum

The transitions that shaped my educational and professional development did not end with high school graduation. They continued through college, graduate school, career changes, and professional advancement, and evolving access needs. Throughout those transitions, VR remained a consistent source of support. This

experience reinforces the idea that transition is best understood and as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Preparing students for adulthood involves more than helping them move from high school to their next destination. It also involves helping them develop the knowledge, relationships, and connections that can support them through future transitions that may unfold over many years.

The Student Who Doesn't Know What They Don't Know

As I reflect on my educational journey, I do not see a failure of preparation. I see a gap in preparation. My K-12 education provided the academic skills, self-advocacy abilities, and confidence I needed to pursue higher education successfully. What it did not provide was an awareness of the blindness-specific services, supports, and partnerships that would later prove essential to my success. The reality is simple: students cannot access resources they do not know exist.

The most important lesson from my experience is not that we need to teach more. It is that we need to connect more. Throughout my school years, resources such as VR, orientation and mobility services, assistive technology supports, and transition programs existed within my community, yet I graduated without knowing they were available. When I eventually connected with VR, that partnership expanded my opportunities, strengthened my independence, and helped shape my educational and professional trajectory. The challenge was never the absence of services. It was the absence of connection.

My experience is not unique. Many students who are blind or have low vision leave school with strong academic foundations, but little awareness of the networks, agencies, and partnerships designed to support their transition into adulthood. This raises an important challenge for TSVIs and other transition professionals: Are we preparing students only to graduate, or are we preparing them to thrive beyond graduation?

If we are to close the gap between school and adult life, we must expand our vision of transition planning. TSVIs must continue to be experts in access, literacy, and academic success, but they can also serve as early career-path architects, helping students build the relationships, knowledge, and community connections that will support them long after they leave the classroom. A diploma is an important milestone, but it should not be the ultimate measure of readiness. True preparation means ensuring that students leave school not only with skills and confidence, but also with a clear understanding of where to turn, who to call, and how to access the opportunities that await them.

When students graduate with both competence and connection, they are prepared not only for their next step, but for a lifetime of transitions.

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Getting In Touch with Literacy & AT 2027
December 6th-9th
CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Proposals related to all areas of literacy for individuals with visual impairments and related AT are now being accepted for presentations at the **Sixteenth Biennial Getting in Touch with Literacy & AT Conference**. Hosted by EnhanceAbility and Council for Exceptional Children Division on Visual Impairment & Deafblindness. Proposals that focus on the development and use of literacy and related AT skills at all ages, ability levels, and in all media, will be considered for acceptance at this premiere topical conference.

In order to give as many presenters as possible the opportunity to present at this conference, proposals must be limited to a total of two sessions and one poster session per person. This includes presentations as either lead presenter or as a co-presenter.

The Getting in Touch with Literacy & AT conference is a conference that includes underlying respect for literacy at all ages and ability levels. Presentations are encouraged on topics related to infants and toddlers, school aged students, and adults. Professionals addressing literacy skills in rehabilitation settings are encouraged to submit proposals. To submit your proposal use the link: https://cec1785.wufoo.com/forms/w16w36ka06m53uv/

All proposals must be submitted **no later than January 10th**. Program decisions will be finalized by the beginning of March, and all submitters will be notified of their proposal status at that time. Presenters must be available to present **December 6–9**. Due to scheduling needs, requests for specific presentation days cannot be accommodated.

For questions regarding the proposal process or conference program, please contact **Dr. Nicole Johnson** at **njohnson@kutztown.edu**

NOTE: ALL PRESENTERS MUST REGISTER FOR THE CONFERENCE. PRESENTERS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR OWN TRAVEL AND ACCOMODATIONS.

Presentations take place December 7th-9th. Presenters need to be available any of the days!

Name of Lead Presenter:
Affiliation:
Email:
Co-presenters' Names, Titles, Emails and Affiliation (if applicable):
NOTE: *All presenters must be listed here to be included in the conference program. Write names, titles, and affiliations exactly as you want them to appear in the program.*

Title of Presentation (as it should appear in the Conference Program):
Brief program description (as it should appear in the program and pre-conference advertisements - Limit of 50 words):

Type of presentation (all presentations are scheduled for 1 hour):

- ☐ Concurrent Session
- ☐ Panel
- ☐ Workshop (interactive)
- ☐ Poster
- ☐ Roundtable

Please provide a one-page description of your proposed presentation. Information shared might include the following:

- Overall purpose and relevance to literacy (limit to 300 words or less)
- Type of information being shared (i.e. research, practice oriented, medical).
- Targeted age group (early childhood, elementary, high school, adult, etc.) and population to which information best applies (students/adults with low vision, gifted students, struggling braille readers, students with multiple disabilities, etc.)
- Target audience (teachers of students with visual impairments, rehabilitation teachers, low vision therapists, transcribers, parents, students, or others

AV Equipment

All rooms will be equipped with the following equipment:

- Speaker's table
- LCD projector

- Screen
- Speaker's podium

If you need the following items, please come prepared with your own equipment:

- Laptop computer
- External speakers
- Adaptors for your equipment

If you have additional AV needs, please specify your needs below. Please note that not all AV equipment requested will be available and there may be an additional charge to the presenter for unique requests, including wifi access.
Participants should have access to a table to prepare file folders with CVI activities.

All speakers must register for the conference and secure their own travel and hotel accommodations. Please check the conference website at www.gitwl.org or scan the QR Code for information regarding registration and hotel reservations.

Transition at Every Step: Building Independence through O&M from Preschool Onward

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Abstract

Transitions begin with birth and unfold continuously across the lifespan, yet within educational systems they are often narrowly framed as a legislatively defined secondary school process. This reactive approach can overlook the developmental nature of transition planning, and the many transitions students experience throughout their lives. In practice, transition is not a single event but a series of everyday experiences, from moving from kindergarten to first grade to navigating between classrooms, the gym, and the cafeteria. For students, these moments require increasing competence in spatial awareness, communication, decision-making, and independent movement. Because successful navigation of transitions depends on the gradual development of these skills, transition planning must extend beyond formal secondary processes. Orientation and Mobility (O&M), one

of the nine areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), provides a foundation for supporting these ongoing transitions. Beginning in early childhood, O&M fosters purposeful movement, environmental awareness, exploration, and the skills needed to access increasingly complex physical and social environments. By intentionally embedding O&M and collaborative ECC instruction across educational settings, educators can promote continuity in skill development and better prepare students for both every day and long-term transitions. Drawing on practice-based examples from a variety of educational contexts, this article illustrates how O&M instruction can support students' successful navigation of transitions throughout their educational journeys and beyond.

Orientation and Mobility: Integral to ECC and Access

Orientation and Mobility (O&M) is a core component of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC; Hatlen, 1996) and provides a useful lens for understanding transition as a developmental process that begins long before students approach graduation. Although transition is often associated with secondary school planning, O&M specialists routinely support transitions throughout a student's life. A toddler reaching toward a sound source, a preschooler learning the layout of a playground, a middle school student changing classes independently, or a high school student

navigating public transit for the first time are all engaged in transitions that require increasingly sophisticated orientation, mobility, and problem-solving skills.

As students grow, O&M instruction evolves alongside them. Early lessons may focus on body awareness, sensory exploration, and concept development, while later instruction emphasizes route travel, environmental analysis, use of mobility tools, public transportation, community travel, and self-advocacy (Cutter, 2007; Pogrund & Fazzi, 2002). Across each developmental stage, the underlying goal remains the same: helping students gather information from their environments, make decisions, solve problems, participate with increasing self-sufficiency in everyday activities, and develop the self-empowerment needed to direct their own movement and participation.

The examples that follow illustrate how O&M instruction can be embedded within classroom routines, playground activities, school transitions, community experiences, and adult environments while simultaneously supporting many ECC areas. Together, they demonstrate how transition skills develop through everyday opportunities to explore, participate, solve problems, and navigate increasingly complex environments.

Table 1

Selected Resource List used for Instruction of Orientation and Mobility

Area of focus	
Applications	The Metronome app by Soundbrenner
	Online Metronome by FluteTunes
	Use games such WordScape, Puzzles as a reward
	Compass app large print application
	Perkins: Way Finding Tools
O&M activities organized by grade level	Parent Mobility
Active learning for students with multiple disabilities	Lillie Nielsen: Active Learning Space
	NCDB Guide: Active Learning
	Zoe in the little room-YouTube
Various Materials	
Mapping	Perkins: Tactile Town
	APH Tactile Town
	Wheatley Board
	Math Hundreds Board
	Tactile stickers or Perkins Brailler (make patterns)
	Snap cubes
	Draftsman and stencils
	Wikki Stix
	inTACT Sketchpad
	Analog clock for time and cardinal direction
	MadLabDesign by SF Lighthouse

Children books	
Looking Out for Sarah by Glenna Lang	• Guide dogs • Community travel • Independence • Orientation and mobility • ISBN: 9781570916076
My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay by Cari Best	• Self-determination • Independent travel • Self-advocacy • High expectations • ISBN: 9780374388195
Follow My Leader by James B. Garfield	• Adjustment to vision loss • Cane and guide dog use • Community mobility • ISBN: 9780590424639
Rescue and Jessica: A Life-Changing Friendship by Jessica Kensky & Patrick Downes	• Friendship • Independence • Resilience • Service-dogs • ISBN: 9781536203011
The Cane Kids by Kristen Lang	• Blindness and low vision • Canes • Independence • Assistive technology • ISBN: 9798218606459

From Rolling to Crawling

I was part of the early intervention team supporting Jules, an eight-month-old blind infant. Their Little Room was part of their regular routine. The familiar arrangement of objects created a predictable environment for exploration and learning. During a session, we introduced two new everyday objects alongside several familiar favorites. As Jules reached toward a preferred chewy toy, their hand found a whisk instead. They paused, then returned to it repeatedly, exploring

its shape, texture, and the soft metallic sound it produced when moved. To reinforce these concepts in another setting, many of the same objects were later incorporated into playmat activities. What began as a small change to a familiar environment became an opportunity for comparison, exploration, concept development, and the application of learning across settings.

Early O&M development begins with purposeful movement of the arms and legs as infants learn to interact with the world beyond their bodies. From a developmental perspective, early motor and sensory experiences represent a child's first transitions, moving from awareness of self to awareness of the environment and eventually to independent navigation within increasingly complex settings (Cutter, 2007; Hill & Ponder, 1976; Pogrund & Fazzi, 2002). Hill and Ponder (1976) emphasized that effective O&M instruction is grounded in an individual's ability to gather, interpret, and use information from the environment, while Cutter's (2007) developmental framework describes independent travel as emerging through progressively more complex interactions with that environment. During infancy and early childhood, movement and active exploration support the development of body awareness, balance, motor coordination, muscle tone and strength, spatial understanding, and environmental concepts. Immersive experiences with constant narration (i.e., descriptive mediation; Allman & Lewis, 2014) also provide the foundation for language and concept development, as

children learn to attach meaning to objects, actions, locations, and relationships within their environment. Pogrund and Fazzi (2002) further note that children with visual disabilities require intentional opportunities to develop sensory efficiency and build concepts about themselves and the world around them. Together, these foundational motor, sensory, language, and conceptual skills provide the basis for later orientation, problem-solving, route travel, and independent mobility across increasingly complex environments.

Finding My Place: Belonging, Play, and Early Independence

I was the first O&M provider to work with both Marlowe and Oakley, two students who were blind. When I met Marlowe in preschool, adults were understandably concerned about their safety. Their hand was always held as they moved through the school, and they were not permitted on the playground with their peers. During our O&M lessons, we began exploring the playground together, learning where pathways led, how equipment was organized, and how to move safely between areas. By the time I met Oakley in kindergarten, a similar pattern had emerged. Adults and well-meaning classmates routinely led Oakley by the hand. One of our first goals was learning to travel independently to the shared bathroom across an open area connecting four classrooms. Together, we practiced trailing, crossing open space, and using environmental clues such as changes in flooring texture. As both students developed confidence and orientation skills

through these everyday experiences, adults gradually stepped back, allowing them to take a more independent role in navigating their school environments.

As children enter elementary school, O&M instruction expands from foundational movement and concept development to the practical skills needed to access and participate fully in the school environment. Independence often begins with locating and managing personal spaces such as a cubby, backpack area, desk, and classroom learning centers, while gradually extending to navigation throughout the school building and grounds. Consistent with the TAPS (Teaching Age-Appropriate Purposeful Skills) framework, instruction during this period emphasizes meaningful participation in age-appropriate routines and activities that foster independence, responsibility, and self-confidence (Pogrund et al., 2012). These experiences naturally support multiple areas of the ECC, including independent living skills, self-determination, sensory efficiency, and social interaction. O&M skills similarly support social inclusion by enabling students to access peer play opportunities, develop playground routines, understand spatial relationships during group activities, and engage in the reciprocal interactions that contribute to friendship development. Participation in classroom jobs, school routines, playground activities, and physical education further promotes independence, self-determination, recreation and leisure skills, and a sense of belonging. Together, classroom participation, social engagement, and recreation

experiences illustrate how O&M supports the development of ECC-related skills within authentic routines, preparing students for the increasing demands of future transitions.

Beyond the Homeroom: Navigating a Bigger World

I first met Hollis during their final year of middle school. Hollis had low vision, significant photophobia and field loss, and although they did not use a cane, they would be expected to navigate a much larger high school environment the following year. With support from the receiving high school administration, we arranged multiple visits before the school's official orientation day. Together, we traveled by public transit from home to the school, explored entrances, hallways, and common areas, and identified important social destinations both on and off campus, including gathering spaces, cafés, and a nearby strip mall. Some educators questioned why repeated visits were necessary, but each trip provided opportunities to build familiarity, develop orientation strategies, and practice accessing the spaces where social connections would naturally occur. By the time school began, the high school was no longer an unfamiliar destination, but a community Hollis had already begun to navigate with confidence.

As students transition to middle school, O&M instruction increasingly focuses on providing access to a more complex and dynamic educational environment. Rather than remaining in a single classroom, students are expected to

travel independently between multiple classrooms, often navigating crowded hallways, changing schedules, and limited passing times. For students who are blind or have low vision, each classroom may present unique physical layouts, organizational systems, and access considerations. O&M instruction helps students develop efficient route-travel skills, environmental analysis, problem-solving, and the organizational (i.e., compensatory; Allman & Lewis, 2014) strategies needed to manage braille materials, assistive technology, and other learning tools throughout the school day. Consistent with age-appropriate participation, students are increasingly expected to take responsibility for their learning, advocate for needed supports, and manage daily school routines (Wolffe & Rosenblum, 2014). At the same time, access extends beyond academics to include physical education, extracurricular activities, clubs, athletics, and social events that contribute to belonging and school engagement. Lieberman and colleagues (2025) highlighted the importance of meaningful participation in physical education and recreation for promoting motor competence, social inclusion, and lifelong healthy lifestyles. Through participation in these educational, recreational, and social experiences, O&M supports the development of independence, self-determination, self-empowerment, recreation and leisure skills, health, and community participation, laying important groundwork for the increased expectations of high school and adult life.

From Campus to Community: Preparing for Life Beyond School

I worked with Tatum during their final year of high school as they prepared for the transition to college. Together, we visited several campuses, locating disability service offices, financial aid offices, study spaces, social areas, and public transit routes. Rather than simply finding these locations, Tatum practiced introducing themselves and asking questions about accommodations, documentation requirements, and available supports. These conversations often led to discussions about the differences between high school and college. Tatum was surprised to learn that accommodations would not automatically follow them from their IEP and that they would be responsible for requesting services, providing documentation, and communicating their needs. Through these visits, Tatum learned that successful transition involves more than navigating a campus; it also requires navigating adult systems and responsibilities.

As students transition into high school and prepare for postsecondary education, employment, and adult life, O&M instruction increasingly emphasizes self-advocacy, self-determination, and navigation within authentic community environments. Students must learn to access larger and less predictable settings, including college campuses, workplaces, public transportation systems, medical facilities, and recreational venues. Parker and Casias (2025) note that community-based instruction becomes increasingly important as students prepare for adult

roles. Although concerns related to safety, transportation, liability, and scheduling can limit off-campus instruction, students require opportunities to navigate real-world environments, access supports, and accommodations and participate meaningfully in their communities.

I met Briar during their first year of college. Although the residence hall had a mandatory orientation for incoming students, Briar chose not to attend because they were anxious about standing out as a blind student in an unfamiliar social environment. As the semester progressed, it became clear that navigating campus was only one part of the transition. We worked on emergency evacuation routes, locating key campus services, and developing more efficient travel strategies. Briar often relied on shoreline travel and the campus golf cart service, and their limited understanding of cardinal directions and 90-degree turns frequently left them disoriented. We also encountered challenges that had little to do with travel. When an inaccessible touch-screen laundry system created barriers, I discovered that Briar had never done their own laundry and was unfamiliar with how much detergent to use, how to select wash settings, or why overloading a machine affected how well clothes were cleaned. We practiced locating and navigating the gym, managing early morning appointments, which they often missed particularly during cold winter mornings, and planning enough time to travel independently across campus. These experiences highlighted that successful transition involved

far more than reaching college; it required developing the independent living, problem-solving, and self-management skills expected in adult environments.

As students prepare for adulthood, O&M becomes increasingly intertwined with all areas of the ECC, particularly independent living skills, assistive technology use, and self-determination. Students may require instruction in community travel related to shopping, meal preparation, laundry, banking, accessing healthcare, and managing everyday errands. As students approach the age of majority (i.e., turning 18; IDEA, 2004), they must understand that educational decision-making rights transfer from their parents to them, requiring knowledge of disability legislation, accommodations, vocational rehabilitation services, postsecondary support systems, and their rights and responsibilities as self-advocates. At this stage, O&M instruction extends beyond learning how to travel safely and efficiently to helping students access opportunities, navigate adult systems, and participate more fully in community life.

Graduation ceremonies often bring accessibility concerns to the forefront. In one year, I worked with two high school students, Oakley, who was deafblind, and Wren, a cane user with light perception. Concerned that the podium and stage configuration posed safety risks, administrators initially proposed having both students bypass the stage entirely and rely on human guides rather than participating in the ceremony in the same manner as their peers. While framed as

a safety measure, the proposal would have excluded both from a central component of the graduation experience. Because the stage was not set up until the Friday before graduation, we used the limited time available to practice locating, ascending, and exiting the stage, as well as positioning for handshakes and receiving their diplomas. Years later, I supported Indigo, a college student with low vision and a guide dog user. When administrators arranged for an escort across the stage, Indigo asked, "Can I practice first to see if I can do it?" After two hours of rehearsal, Indigo independently navigated the route from their seat to the podium and back. Watching Oakley, Wren, and Indigo cross the stage on their own terms was a source of pride for the students, their families, and everyone who had supported them along the way. These experiences reinforced a common lesson: meaningful inclusion is often achieved not by reducing expectations, but by providing opportunities to prepare, practice, and demonstrate competence, and experience the self-empowerment that comes from participating on one's own terms.

On Campus, Off Campus: How District Policies Restrict Access

The experiences of Hollis, Tatum, Briar, and Indigo shared one common feature: they required instruction beyond the school campus. In North America, O&M is recognized as a specialized related service designed to support students' ability to understand their environment, travel safely and efficiently, and access

educational, social, and community opportunities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) defines O&M as: *"Services provided to blind or visually impaired children by qualified personnel to enable those students to attain systematic orientation to and safe movement within their environments in school, home, and community"* (34 CFR §300.34(c)(7)). Despite this mandate, community-based instruction is sometimes restricted by administration or caregiver concerns related to safety, liability, transportation, or supervision. As a result, O&M specialists, who are often the sole provider serving multiple schools or districts, may often need to advocate for access to authentic community environments. One grassroots initiative in California provides practitioners with important support in these efforts.

California's Assembly Bill 947 (AB 947), enacted in 2019, formally recognized the importance of the ECC for students with visual disabilities (Shupin et al., 2022). The legislation further requires that O&M evaluations be conducted by appropriately credentialed specialists in familiar and unfamiliar environments, including home, school, and community settings as appropriate. Emerging from concerns that some local education agencies (LEAs) had restricted community-based O&M instruction, AB 947 has been recognized as affirming students' rights to receive community-based O&M evaluation and instruction when needed, reinforcing the role of real-world travel experiences in developing autonomy and

supporting meaningful participation in education, employment, and community life (Shupin et al., 2022).

Diverse Learners, Shared Expectations

Students who are English Language Learners (ELLs), have extensive support needs (ESN; Kurth et al., 2019), or use ambulatory aids in addition to a long cane may require highly individualized instructional approaches, but the goals of O&M remain consistent: supporting access, participation, self-determination, and inclusion. For multilingual learners, O&M instruction often involves simultaneous concept and language development. A student may understand a concept in their home language yet lack the English vocabulary needed to describe locations, relationships, environmental features, or movement (Miller, 2016). In these situations, instruction focuses on connecting experiences, concepts, and language while emphasizing collaboration with families and providing opportunities for meaningful participation in daily routines and environments.

When I first met Zayd, a second-grade student who had recently immigrated from Egypt, they were blind as a result of bilateral retinoblastoma and had limited English proficiency. As we traveled through the school, it became clear that many concepts were familiar, even when the English vocabulary was not. Zayd demonstrated remarkable auditory awareness. They consistently identified nearby doorways, walls, and open spaces and could locate the cafeteria by sound. At the

same time, our lessons often revealed how language and concepts develop through experience. While learning stair travel, Zayd described a flight of stairs as "a bunch of curbs." During another lesson, when I explained that the cane should remain centered in front of their body and aligned with the belly button, they burst into laughter and replied, "Bellies don't have buttons!" These moments became opportunities to connect new vocabulary and concepts to meaningful experiences. Over time, Zayd's growing English vocabulary became increasingly linked to the environments they navigated and the skills they were developing.

For students with ESN, O&M instruction may emphasize communication, movement initiation, environmental awareness, and self-determination (Trief et al., 2007). Despite their right to O&M services, students with multiple disabilities have historically received less attention within the O&M literature and are often not recognized by teams as traditional O&M learners during educational (IEP) or transition planning (Trief et al., 2007). Broader workforce and workload concerns within the field may further contribute to challenges in identifying and serving students with complex needs, particularly when service delivery is driven by caseloads rather than individualized educational needs (Ericson et al., 2024). Students who communicate through augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems, switches, body movements, facial expressions, or other emergent forms of communication are especially vulnerable to having mobility goals viewed

primarily through a caregiving or safety lens rather than as opportunities for exploration, participation, and self-determination. Unfortunately, educational teams may inadvertently create additional barriers when AAC devices are carried by educational assistants rather than the student or are left behind in classrooms during O&M instruction or community-based activities for "safekeeping" or perceived safety concerns. AAC systems are the student's voice and should accompany them across home, school, and community environments. When educational professionals remove access to a student's AAC device, they effectively remove that student's primary avenue for communication, choice-making, self-advocacy, and participation. O&M instruction provides natural opportunities for students to use their AAC device to express preferences, ask questions, make decisions, anticipate destinations, interact with others, and communicate about their experiences in real time. Opportunities to explore environments, make choices, anticipate destinations, and interact with people and objects can support both cognitive and communicative development (Chen & Downing, 2006; Trief et al., 2013). Through repeated experiences with movement and exploration, students begin to develop concepts of cause and effect, object permanence, spatial relationships, routines, and social interactions.

When I began working with Rowan, a student with low vision, intellectual disabilities, and limited verbal communication, adults routinely held their hand

whenever they moved through the school. Although Rowan had functional vision and could identify high-contrast surfaces and pathways, they rarely initiated independent movement. During O&M lessons, we focused on building confidence through short travel experiences, encouraging movement toward familiar destinations, and increasing opportunities to make choices. Progress was often measured not by distance traveled but by Rowan's willingness to independently take the next step.

Maya used a power wheelchair and communicated using switches programmed with messages such as 'yes,' 'no,' and 'go,' During O&M lessons, we practiced controlling speed, navigating hallways safely, making directional decisions by raising their hand or turning toward the side to which they needed to turn, and scanning for environmental information. As Maya's confidence increased, they became more active in directing their own movement and communicating their travel preferences.

Whether students are communicating through speech, AAC, body movements, or switches, O&M creates opportunities to interact with the environment, influence outcomes, and develop a sense of agency.

Family values, cultural expectations, and beliefs about disability may also influence how independence and transition are understood. Effective O&M instruction requires collaboration with families to identify approaches that respect

cultural perspectives while creating opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to participate as fully as possible in school, community, and adult life.

I worked with Aylin, a Deafblind and autistic high school student. Aylin used a white cane and relied on a combination of functional vision and hearing aids to access information from the environment. Within their family's cultural setting, independence was viewed differently, and family members felt strongly that they should remain closely involved in Aylin's daily life. "I don't need to learn this," Aylin often told me, "I'll never be alone." Together, we worked on routes between home and school while helping the family understand how independent travel skills could enhance safety rather than reduce it. Family members observed O&M lessons and learned strategies for supporting Aylin's growing independence. Rather than leading, they practiced walking a step behind and providing support only when needed. Over time, both Aylin and their family began to recognize that independence and support could coexist.

Conclusion

By reframing transition as an ongoing, developmentally sequenced process grounded in O&M and ECC instruction, educators can move beyond compliance-driven planning toward proactive, meaningful skill development. This perspective positions transition not as a discrete outcome of secondary education, but as a continuous process supported through the development of sensory efficiency,

spatial understanding, tool use, environmental navigation, and skills of self-determination. Embedding O&M across the lifespan creates a pathway toward greater autonomy, access, and participation in school, community, and adult life.

O&M is not a service that ends at graduation. Adults who are blind or have low vision often benefit from additional instruction as they encounter new environments, changes in vision, evolving technologies, and during major life transitions. Schools play a critical role in establishing this foundation by helping students develop not only travel skills, but also the confidence, self-empowerment, problem-solving abilities, and self-advocacy needed to navigate life's transitions independently and seek out O&M support when circumstances warrant it long after their school years have ended.

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The intended purpose of the Spring 2027 convention issue is to provide manuscripts aimed at practitioners about presenter contributions to the CEC 2027 program and work related to the field of visual impairments and deafblindness. This issue will allow those who were unable to attend your session to know more about your work.

Guidelines:

-2,000 - 5,000 Words
-Tables and figures should have a text description & title (APA 7th edition)
- Alt text included for images
-References
-APA formatting (7th Edition)
-12 point, Times New Roman or Arial font
-Author information for title: Name, affiliation, highest degree earned, and email address
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New Tools, New Heights: Transforming the Transition Journey with AI

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The journey from early childhood to adulthood includes numerous transitions that shape a student's educational, social, and personal development. In the field of special education, this process has been extensively studied not only under the transition planning guidance of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), but also in light of the series of transitions that occur across different stages of life. These include the initial transition from home life to attending school for the first time, moving from grade to grade, changes in campus from elementary to middle school to high school, and post-graduation plans. For each child, these individual educational progressions coexist with other transitions

within the personal family system (e.g., moving or changes in family structure). When a child and their family navigate these phases while having a visual impairment (VI), additional considerations arise.

From the moment a child is diagnosed with a visual impairment, they enter a world with new challenges. At the same time, they gain access to specialized supports, including teachers of students with visual impairments (TSVI), orientation and mobility specialists (COMS), teachers of students who are deafblind (TDB), and certified assistive technology instructional specialists (CATIS). Children with VI are also eligible for specially designed instruction under IDEA (2004), which can be prioritized according to the nine areas of the expanded core curriculum (ECC; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010; Chase, 2022). While several ECC areas have an obvious connection to transition, such as independent living, career education, and self-determination, Travers noted that "each of the nine areas of the ECC are directly relevant to preparing students for life after school" (2024, p. 300). Research supports this broader view of transition preparation. Orientation and mobility and assistive technology have been specifically linked to positive post-secondary outcomes (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011). Similarly, McDonnall et al., (2025) found that proficient braille use in adulthood is positively associated with employment, highlighting the importance of compensatory access skills across a child's education. Emerging technologies,

particularly artificial intelligence (AI), may provide new opportunities to support many of these transition-related skills and experiences.

Skills that Support Successful Transitions

At a minimum, transition planning under IDEA (2004) begins at age 16, is reviewed annually, and determines post-secondary goals in the following three categories: training and education, employment, and independent living (Shogren et al., 2017). However, each of the areas is grounded in overall themes of guidance for transition planning at every stage of life. Transition is a collaborative process that should include person-centered planning and a strengths-based approach (Wells & Sheehey, 2012). According to Perkins School for the Blind, person-centered planning is "a facilitated process used to assist individual students and their families with developing a shared vision for the student's future and creating a transition plan that aligns with their vision with a focus on expanding community involvement" (2026, n.p.).

Though it is legally required to start planning at age 16, the skills and awareness needed by students should begin to be developed in early childhood. Mazzotti et al. (2021) identified predictors of post-school success, including: technology skills, career awareness, work experience, goal setting, community experiences, parent expectations and involvement, psychological empowerment, self-realization, self-advocacy, independent living skills, and autonomy/decision-

making. Approaching each transition intentionally, focusing on developing these skills, allows families and vision professionals to support students at every step along the way. For a summary of relevant skills and their alignment to the ECC, see Table 1.

Table 1

Aligned priorities for transition for people with visual impairments

Predictors of Post-School Success (Mazzotti et al., 2021)	**Expanded Core Curriculum (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010)**	**Transition Core Areas**
Technology skills	Assistive technology Compensatory access	Education Employment Independent living
Career awareness Work experience	Career education Compensatory access Assistive technology	Education Employment
Goal-setting	Self-determination	Education Employment Independent living
Community experiences	Social interaction Orientation and mobility Self-determination Independent living Sensory efficiency Compensatory access Recreation and Leisure	Education Employment, Independent living
Parental involvement Parental expectations	Social interaction Orientation and mobility Self-determination Independent living Sensory efficiency Compensatory access Recreation and Leisure	Education Employment Independent living

	Assistive technology Career education	
Psychological empowerment Self-realization Self-advocacy Autonomy/decision-making Goal-setting	Self-determination Career education	Education Employment Independent living
Independent living skills	Independent living Orientation and mobility Sensory efficiency Assistive technology	Independent living

Artificial Intelligence

Technology use is a clear priority for students with visual impairments. Assistive or access technology is represented within the ECC, has been linked to positive transition outcomes (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011; McDonnall et al., 2024), and technology skills have been identified as a predictor of postsecondary success (Mazzotti et al., 2021). For students with VI, artificial intelligence (AI) can serve as a bridge to autonomy. As noted by Zhang et al. (2025), "this growing capacity […] provides promising avenues for improving access to general education curricula and creating personalized learning experiences for students with disabilities" (p.163). To leverage AI effectively for this population, practitioners and families will first need to look past the buzzwords and hype and toward its practical, intentional use to provide access and information.

According to Naatz & Ruppar (2026), “AI can be defined as a technology to enhance human lives, improving efficiency, accuracy, accessibility, and decision-making” (p. 228). For many people, AI acts as a study-buddy, a brainstorming partner, or a statistician on call. People use it to turn lights on and off, secure their homes, interact with their phones, shop, and make their lives a little easier. For students with VI, AI can act as a “synthetic ocular proxy,” processing visual data that the student cannot see and converting it into a medium they can use, such as audio, haptic feedback, or braille-ready text (Zhao et al., 2024).

The role of AI in transition, specifically, is not to replace traditional skills like cane travel or braille literacy, but to serve as an access agent. A white cane provides physical safety (by alerting an individual to an object in front of them) and immediate spatial and environmental awareness (by alerting an individual to a change in surface). In addition to using good mobility skills with a white cane, a wearable AI tool adds context by providing an audible description of the visual environment around them. For example, AI output could add detail such as “you are walking on a sidewalk bordered in grass on the left and rock on the right. The column in front of you marks the entrance to the Student Union.”

AI can be leveraged by practitioners, families, and students themselves. By defining AI, clarifying its role, and recognizing the purposes it can serve, AI can be used in transition with purpose and clear intent. As educational institutions develop

clearer guidelines for AI use, we are witnessing a significant shift in how the technology can be utilized. AI is evolving from a mere “study buddy” into an active agent that provides the situational context required for autonomous decision-making. For students, this could mark a transition from assistance (i.e., relying on others) to greater independence (i.e., leveraging AI-driven insights to make their own informed choices).

Artificial Intelligence and Visual Impairment

Considering AI in the context of VI involves demystifying the technology and moving beyond "chatbots" to understand AI as predictive and interpretive pattern recognition. According to Ha (2025), the benefits of AI for this population include reduced cognitive load, increased independence, and personalized planning. Patel (2025) described three pillars of AI use for people with VI. The first is environmental interpretation, or "scene understanding." In these scenarios, AI supports people with VI by providing real-time information about the physical world (e.g., "Where is the empty chair in this room?"). The second pillar is information synthesis, which includes applications such as text-to-speech and optical character recognition (OCR). For example, Claude AI can summarize inaccessible documents, such as portable document formats (PDFs) or graphics. The third pillar is skills augmentation: AI can support students in practicing and

strengthening academic, self-advocacy, and social skills through role-plays, repetition, simulations, and feedback.

Such uses align with findings from a recent American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) research report. Participants reported using voice-activated AI tools (e.g., Alexa, Siri, Google Assistant), for notetaking and writing, and to summarize and understand information (Silverman et al., 2026). Reported benefits included time savings, perceived helpfulness, and constant availability. As one participant explained in the report by Silverman and colleagues (2026):

> The most important use of AI in education for me is using it to make materials more accessible, especially regarding screen reader compatibility and image descriptions. I also use a screen reader all the time, and misspell a lot, so having it to fix formatting and spelling/grammar is important. (p. 21)

Looking ahead, AI may continue to expand opportunities for accessibility and independence. Ribeiro (2024) suggested that future developments could include human-robot collaboration in dynamic, semi-structured environments such as laboratories. In these settings, robots could assist human partners autonomously without requiring rigid, preplanned coordination. Early examples of this potential are already emerging through innovations such as robotic feeding devices and AI-powered travel assistance systems.

Cautions and Guide Rails

While AI offers exciting new possibilities, it is important to maintain clear boundaries and recognize its limitations. A useful guideline is "*trust but verify*." Human expertise remains essential, as AI cannot replace professional knowledge, critical thinking, or lived experience. Fact-checking is particularly important because AI systems can generate inaccurate information, sometimes referred to as "hallucinations." Users should also avoid sharing personally identifiable information and consider whether AI-generated content is not only accurate but also culturally relevant and appropriate for the intended context. Additionally, the use of AI involves a time investment; in some situations, the effort required to verify output may exceed the time needed to complete the task independently. Because AI models are trained on human-generated data, they can also reflect existing biases. One tool that may help address this concern is NotebookLM. As part of the Google ecosystem, NotebookLM allows users to upload or link specific sources and interact only with those materials. This source-grounded approach provides greater transparency, control, and specificity over the information generated.

Practitioners should also be aware of state, local, and institutional guidelines for AI use, such as AI for Education's compilation of state guidance (2026) and recommendations from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2026). Consistent with these recommendations, Ha (2025) identified five

key considerations for the use of AI for those with VI: privacy, accuracy, bias, dependence, and ethical use. These considerations highlight the need for thoughtful and responsible AI implementation. With these principles in mind, AI can be integrated into transition-focused instruction across developmental stages. The examples that follow illustrate potential ways AI may be aligned with evidence-based transition practices.

Promoting Transition Skills through AI

Like assistive technology, the new affordances of AI can be infused into transition-focused work at any stage of life. Career development occurs through a series of phases: career awareness, career exploration, and career preparation. (Morningstar & Clavenna-Deane, 2018; Wolffe, 1999). For students with disabilities, career development requires intentional, purposeful instruction, as well as meaningful experiences. These activities serve to provide exposure, identify strengths and interests, and offer training and support in learning job skills to enable these students' postsecondary success. Even though career development is a fluid, ongoing process throughout a person's life, separating these work-based learning experiences by phase provides a framework for approaching instruction for students at any age.

Career awareness begins in early childhood and continues through middle school, with the aim of discovering a variety of jobs and careers, often learned

incidentally through exposure from families and neighbors. Career exploration begins in elementary school and continues through high school, introducing students to a range of job skills, career pathways, and postsecondary requirements. Career preparation becomes the focus in high school as students start working part-time, participating in on-the-job training, and taking courses aligned with their career pathway through Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. As Zhang et al. (2025) noted, AI "can be designed to structure interactions that engage students with disabilities in making meaningful choices, expressing needs and preferences in decision-making, and making plans aligned with their sociocultural experiences and strengths" (p. 171). Students may also find that they benefit from asking questions and repeating skills without having to ask others for help. A participant in the AFB study (Silverman et al., 2026) shared:

> Mostly, AI has helped me when I'm having trouble focusing and breaking the steps of an assignment into small, manageable bits of work. It helps to have a partner/tutor who doesn't get impatient with me, who never tires of helping explain something to me, or never thinks I'm stupid when I need its help breaking something down into baby steps, for lack of better words. Humans all too often get frustrated with me or seem to think I shouldn't have the focus problems that I do, and it's beyond helpful that AI doesn't do that. (p. 20)

Early Foundations for Career Awareness

When children are young, families and professionals can use AI in multiple meaningful ways by aligning AI tools with activities that support the current transition recommendations by age. According to the Next Steps to Independence Checklist (Texas Education Agency, 2022), parents can build a foundation of career awareness by embedding options into play and early routines. For example, AI tools can help families create role-play scenarios, conversation prompts, and social stories related to occupations that are already familiar to the child. A caregiver might use AI to generate an age-appropriate description of a relative's job, suggest questions a child could ask during a workplace visit, or develop pretend-play activities connected to careers of interest. During this phase of life, AI can support career awareness by helping children explore and understand the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of people in their families and communities. Another way families can support transition through AI is by modeling appropriate use. When children observe how adults use AI technology, it will give them ideas of what is possible. Further, adults can “talk aloud” during their interactions with AI to provide transparent examples of the process for making choices about the appropriate boundaries.

As they are ready, children and younger students can be invited to collaborate with family members and vision professionals in using AI for a variety

of purposes. Table 2 captures some of the skills critical to using AI appropriately and intentionally. Both families and professionals can identify situations within the student's areas of interest and take time to explicitly practice the skills together.

Table 2

Skills involved in using AI appropriately

Skill	**Guidance**
Identify opportunities for use	Who is the audience? Are there any rules/policies?
Set boundaries	Don't share personally identifying information
Decide which AI tool to use	What is the context? What tools are available?
Write an effective prompt	Use a framework such as the Five S prompting model (AI for Education, 2026), or prompt sentence frames (Goldman et al., 2026)
Review and refine	Check for accuracy Address needed corrections Ask follow-up questions for clarification
Revise output	Remove formatting such as bullets, bold text, and emojis

Beyond modeling good AI use, vision professionals who work with children before they start school have the opportunity to explore career awareness and other transition-related topics with children and families. Although career awareness often develops through incidental exposure to family and community experiences, students with disabilities frequently require more intentional instruction in this area, as exposure precedes interest (Lueking, 2020). In the early years, awareness

can be developed by using AI to provide exposure to a variety of employment options that may not be immediately evident. For example, a child who loves baseball may not realize how many jobs are in the baseball industry, such as working for a team, designing uniforms, marketing and publicity, accounting, customer service, etc.

Using AI to Support Career Exploration

The school environment expands opportunities for AI use. When transitioning from one school to another (e.g., elementary to middle school), students can use AI to learn about a new school, including its history, activities, and navigation. When participating in an Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting, a commonly recognized best practice is for students not only to attend, but also to take an active role in leading the meeting (Seong et al., 2015). With appropriate safeguards to protect personal information, students can use AI to create presentations that showcase their strengths, preferences, and priorities. AI can also support access to information by transforming content into different modalities for improved understanding. In addition, students may use integrated AI features within existing technologies, such as Picture Smart in Job Access With Speech (JAWS), to identify, interpret, and describe images. Tools such as Vispero Companion can also support students in developing greater independence and confidence when using and navigating JAWS.

Care should always be taken to ensure that AI tools aren't used as replacements or workarounds, as this can be counterproductive to the development of necessary skills. AI should be used to augment existing skills, not replace them. ISTE's profile of an "AI-Ready Graduate" includes six areas of AI use for students: learner, researcher, synthesizer, problem solver, connector, and storyteller (2026). While students will continue to develop these roles through graduation, it is important to intentionally build AI-related skills over time.

One skill that can be developed throughout a student's education is effective prompt writing. Goldman et al. (2026) created prompt sentence frames with options tailored to different levels of scaffolding. Using the Five "S" Model from AI for Education (2026), a prompt would include the following steps: Set the scene, be Specific, Simplify your language, Structure the output, and Share feedback. The prompt frames can be adapted for different situations and provide opportunities for explicit instruction and guided practice. Students can be explicitly taught that AI can serve in different roles, and that the more specific their requests, the better the results will be. For example, a fill-in-the-blank frame could be constructed from the following prompts:

- You are [blank] *("set the scene" by identifying what kind of expert could best answer the question.*
- Explain to me/Tell me [blank] *("be specific" by naming the question)*

- Remember that [blank] ("simplify the language" *by identifying the audience who will be receiving the answer)*
- Give me the information as [blank] *("structure the output" by requesting a specific format for the answer*

An example of creating a prompt using these steps is as follows:

> *You are the manager of the San Diego Zoo. Explain to me what jobs people can have at the zoo. Remember that I am a fifth grader. Provide a list of job duties, education requirements, relevant pictures, and the accommodations needed for an employee with a visual impairment.*

In the phases of career development, career exploration naturally follows career awareness. During the school years, students have increasing opportunities to investigate potential careers in greater depth, and AI can support this process in a variety of ways. Purposeful exploration may include volunteering in the school and community, touring businesses, learning basic job skills, and completing career interest surveys.

AI Use to Support Transition Planning

Transition planning in schools involves collaboration among individual students, their families, school personnel, and vocational rehabilitation professionals. Planning includes setting post-secondary goals in the areas of education, employment, and independent living. Travers (2024) surveyed TSVIs

regarding 33 specific transition-based practices. The TSVIs indicated a need for training in understanding available post-secondary services available, as well as involving families in career development, developing employment goals, and "high-quality" transition plans (Travers, 2024). One area where AI may be able to support practitioners is by providing guidance and information related to postsecondary services, family involvement in career development, employment goal development, and transition planning.

At the point of transition planning in high school, students move from the career development phase of career exploration into career preparation. This stage includes more specific planning related to the experiences, training, and supports needed to pursue postsecondary goals. Because transition planning focuses on education/training, employment, and independent living, AI can be leveraged in multiple ways to support each of these domains. Opportunities for use are extensive and can be tailored to the needs and goals of individual students. Table 3 includes examples of how AI can be leveraged to support these areas.

Table 3

Examples of AI Tool Use and Alignment

Task	AI application	Alignment to transition
Making a meal independently	Use Goblin Tools recipe option	Independent living
Looking up a new route on public transportation	Use AI options to create, record, or generate routes (such as Clew, PingPath, EyeGuide Vision, BlindNavi)	Orientation and mobility Assistive technology Independent living
Gathering resources on colleges in one place	Use Notebook LM to hold resources and generate summaries of each college's advantages	Career education Assistive technology
Identifying small, medium, or large t-shirts while volunteering at a booth at a community fair	Use Meta Glasses or Be My AI in the Be My Eyes app to identify the labels	Independent living Assistive technology
Brainstorming ideas for a local restaurant to meet friends for lunch	Use Google Gemini to brainstorm a list of restaurants near home or close to bus stops	Social interaction Assistive technology Orientation and mobility Independent living
Making a list of keyboard shortcuts for using Microsoft Excel for a school assignment	Use FS Companion to generate a list of JAWS commands specific to Excel	Assistive technology Education
Making a choice of what movie to watch with family	Parents can ask the student to consult Google Gemini for a synthesis of all the movie's reviews	Self-Determination Assistive technology
Editing a paper written for a high school class	Ask ChatGPT to review a paper for spelling and grammatical errors without changing wording or voice	Education Assistive technology

Role-playing a job interview	Use Diffit pre-built activity to answer interview questions	Career education
Creating flashcards to review new learning	Use NotebookLM to create explainer videos and/or flashcards	Compensatory Assistive technology Independent living Education
Creating an auditory summary of reading material	Use NotebookLM to create explainer videos, or Claude, to analyze and summarize reading material that could be inaccessible	Compensatory Assistive technology Independent living Education
Accessing handwritten whiteboard notes or complex mathematics	Use MathPics Snip or Microsoft OneNote to digitize handwritten notes or complex math equations into an accessible code	Compensatory skills Education Assistive technology

Technological Continuity

A critical yet frequently overlooked component of a successful transition plan is technological continuity. For many students with VI, graduation presents an assistive technology cliff, where the devices and software they mastered in the classroom remain behind with the school district, abruptly halting their independent workflow. To foster genuine vocational readiness, practitioners must advocate for an uninterrupted pipeline of access, ensuring students retain the tools they already know while simultaneously introducing them to emerging, employment-specific technologies before they enter college or the job market. Bridging the AT cliff ensures that academic proficiency translates directly into

workspace competence rather than being lost during the transition. As Thatcher and Rosenblum (2021), noted, university students

> may need to independently read more than 100 pages of text a week. Students with VI need to develop multiple methods for completing reading tasks. They may need to read some of the pages visually and listen to some pages while also taking notes on what they hear. (p. 579)

As students learn to use multiple approaches to reading and information access, AI can provide additional options that allow them to select the method best suited to a particular task or environment.

From School to Work: Wearable Technology in Practice

For employed adults with VI, traditional assistive technology has expanded to include wearable technology. McDonnall et al. (2026) noted that a key role of vision professionals is introducing students and families to AI options for future use. In professional environments, the ability to use hands-free document reading and real-time facial recognition is more than a convenience; it can serve as a critical equalizer. Advanced wearables such as OrCam, Envision Glasses, and Meta Glasses function as an unobtrusive layer of assistive technology, allowing employees to access printed workflows and navigate workplace social dynamics without interrupting their tasks. The authors also found that individuals with VI were using AI in the workplace both through assistive technology applications,

such as JAWS, Be My AI, and Seeing AI, and through general-purpose AI tools such as ChatGPT. Reading was overwhelmingly the most common task participants used smart glasses for, followed by object identification or description, visual assistance, and scene description (p. 144). Additional advantages of mainstream devices included more frequent updates, lower cost, and greater social acceptance (McDonnall et al., 2026). A critical challenge for transition teams involves collaborating with state vocational rehabilitation programs to ensure students do not lose access to these vital tools upon graduation

Conclusion

AI is in a period of rapid growth and development, requiring practitioners to stay informed about emerging tools, applications, and considerations. Table 4 provides selected resources for learning more about transition planning and artificial intelligence.

Table 4

Resources with Embedded Links

Transition	Artificial Intelligence
National Technical Assistance Center on Transition	FS Companion
OU Zarrow Institute on Transition	NotebookLM
KU Transition Coalition	Seeing AI

TransCen	Be My Eyes (Including Be My AI)
Empower VI	Envision App
TransitionTN	GoblinTools
4to24 App (Steverson et al., 2022)	Diffit
Perkins School for the Blind Transition Center Transition Facebook Community	Ally App
Perkins School for the Blind Transition Center	Google Lens
Vanderbilt Iris Resource Locator (choose Transition)	NaturalReader
Pathways: Texas Transition and Employment Guide	Aira Access AI feature inside Explorer App
	AI for Education
	Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning (CIDDL)
	ISTE AI Initiative
	Digital Promise
	Google Lookout

Just as with assistive technology, AI tools should be thoughtfully individualized to each student's strengths, needs, and preferences. As Ha (2025) stated, "AI should augment, not replace, essential skills." When used intentionally and responsibly, AI offers students with VI an expanded set of tools to support access, skill development, career exploration, and independence. From the early years through transition planning and into adulthood, these tools have the potential to support students, families, and vision professionals in pursuing meaningful educational, employment, and independent living outcomes.

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Supporting Lifespan Transition: Practical Tools from Diagnosis to Employment

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Abstract

Transition is often framed as a secondary school requirement tied to compliance and postsecondary planning. For learners who are blind or deafblind, particularly those with complex needs, this perspective overlooks the continuous nature of transition across the lifespan. From early intervention and school entry to secondary education and adult services, individuals and families navigate multiple transitions that require sustained instructional support. This practitioner-focused article reframes transition as an ongoing process grounded in the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) and supported through structured tools that extend learning beyond direct service time. Drawing on field-informed practice, the article examines common gaps in transition implementation and highlights how resources developed through The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) and ConnectCenter can reinforce instruction, promote self-determination, and support family engagement. Practical strategies are provided for integrating tools into early childhood, school-age, and transition-age instruction. By positioning structured

tools as instructional infrastructure rather than supplemental resources, this article offers educators actionable approaches to strengthen continuity, collaboration, and meaningful outcomes for learners across the lifespan.

Transition as an Instructional Through-Line

Transition is too often framed as something that begins at age sixteen, a requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), a checklist item, or a meeting that signals preparation for adult services (IDEA, 2004; Test et al., 2009). For learners who are blind or deafblind, particularly those with complex profiles —referred to throughout this article as learners with disabilities—this framing is not only incomplete but also limiting. Transition is not an event; it is the instructional through-line of a learner's life. When viewed through a broader lens, transition encompasses a series of developmental shifts that occur across early childhood, school-age years, and adulthood, each requiring intentional support and skill development.

Across development, individuals experience multiple transitions that shape access, identity, and independence. Entering early intervention, moving from home to preschool, navigating the shift from elementary to middle school, and preparing for employment are not isolated milestones but part of a continuous process. Even in adulthood, late-onset vision loss introduces new transitions that require

adjustment, access to resources, and ongoing learning. When transition is narrowly defined as a secondary-level requirement, opportunities to build foundational skills earlier in life are often missed.

As a result, educators and families are left navigating a recurring challenge: how to sustain instruction between formal planning meetings. Questions about access, independence, and next steps often emerge after Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings conclude, when direct service time is limited and support systems are fragmented (IDEA, 2004). This gap between formal planning and daily implementation is where transition efforts most often break down, highlighting the need for tools and strategies that extend instruction into real-world contexts.

Across the lifespan, educators often draw from curated tools to reinforce instruction beyond direct service time. Resources developed through The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) and ConnectCenter support transition instruction at multiple developmental stages, from early family understanding and literacy foundations to adjustment resources, career exploration, and adult independence. When used intentionally, these tools extend Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) instruction and provide families with accessible language and practical next steps (Hatlen, 1996; Lewis, 2018).

The Reinforcement Gap

Professionals serving students with visual disabilities operate within significant structural constraints that impact the continuity of transition support. Teachers of students with visual impairments (TSVIs), orientation and mobility specialists (OMS), and other service providers must balance direct instruction with collaboration, documentation, consultation, and communication responsibilities (Ericson et al., 2024). Whether services are delivered through itinerant or school-based models, limited time and competing demands can make it difficult to provide the repetition, reinforcement, and follow-up necessary for meaningful skill development.

At the same time, transition planning increasingly involves coordination among school personnel, families, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and other adult-service providers. Although IDEA (2004) requires transition planning to address postsecondary outcomes, connections between school and adult-service systems are not always seamless, creating discontinuity during critical transition periods. Families are simultaneously navigating emotional adjustment, advocacy demands, and daily logistics, often without consistent access to guidance outside of formal meetings.

Within this context, the most vulnerable moment in any transition often occurs after the annual meeting ends. IFSPs and IEPs may be thoughtfully developed and transition goals clearly documented, yet families frequently leave

with questions that arise later when attempting to apply information in everyday situations. Students require repeated opportunities to practice self-advocacy, and skills introduced during instruction must be reinforced across settings to become meaningful. The gap between formal planning and daily implementation is not a reflection of inadequate practice but rather a structural reality of current service delivery models.

Structured Tools as Instructional Infrastructure

For the purposes of this article, structured tools refer to curated resources that provide consistent language, guided learning opportunities, reflection, and practical strategies that extend instruction beyond direct service time. These tools may include family information resources, adjustment and self-advocacy materials, career exploration resources, guided discussion prompts, professional learning modules, and other APH and ConnectCenter resources designed to support ECC-related learning. Although the format may vary, a common feature is that they create opportunities for learners, families, and professionals to revisit concepts, reinforce skills, and connect instruction to everyday experiences. Examples of structured tools across the lifespan are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of Structured Tools Across the Lifespan

Developmental Stage	Transition Focus	Link
Early Childhood	New diagnosis, family adjustment	Recent Diagnosis
Early Childhood	Family support	FamilyConnect
Early Childhood	Learners with complex needs	Sensing and Learning with the APH Hive
Elementary & Middle School	Identity, adjustment, self-determination	APH ConnectCenter
Elementary & Middle School	Understanding blindness and low vision	Resources for Blindness and Low Vision
High School	Career exploration	CareerConnect
High School	Career role models and self-advocacy	Career Conversations
High School	Transition planning	ConnectCenter Overview
Adulthood	Adjustment to vision loss	New to Vision Loss
Adulthood	Independent living and rehabilitation	Life with Vision Loss
Educators & Families	Professional learning	APH Hive
Educators & Families	ECC and transition professional development	APH Hive Professional Learning

Structured tools, when aligned with ECC domains and individualized goals, can help bridge this gap by extending conversations beyond meetings, providing consistent and accessible language, and supporting skill generalization across environments. Rather than replacing instruction, they function as instructional reinforcement, allowing educators and families to sustain learning between limited

service sessions. Resources available through APH ConnectCenter and APH Hive illustrate this approach in different ways. ConnectCenter resources provide families, students, and adults with accessible information, career exploration opportunities, adjustment supports, and practical strategies that can be revisited over time. APH Hive complements these supports through professional learning resources that help educators translate ECC and transition concepts into instructional practice. Together, these tools can extend learning beyond direct service time while strengthening continuity across home, school, community, and adult-service settings (see Table 1).

Early Childhood: Supporting Families and Foundations

For many families, the transition process begins at diagnosis, a period often characterized by uncertainty, emotional adjustment, and the need to quickly understand unfamiliar systems (Pogrund & Fazzi, 2002). Families are asked to absorb new terminology, navigate early intervention services, and make decisions that will influence their child's development. During this time, access to clear, consistent, and revisitable information is essential for building confidence and supporting meaningful participation in decision-making.

I once worked with a family whose child had just been diagnosed with optic nerve hypoplasia. During the first IFSP meeting, the parents nodded politely as we discussed visual efficiency, early intervention services, and sensory access. Two

days later, the child's mother emailed, "I realized I don't actually understand what any of those words mean. I'm afraid to ask again." When we met again, we focused on a single resource that explained the eye condition in accessible language and introduced one early literacy activity the family could implement at home. Within a week, the family reported increased confidence and shared that they had used the resource to explain their child's needs to extended family members.

The mother's experience reflects a broader principle of early transition support: families benefit from opportunities to revisit information, build understanding over time, and apply strategies within their daily routines. Early transition support is fundamentally family-centered (Dunst & Trivette, 2009), and structured family-centered resources, including those available through APH ConnectCenter, can reinforce conversations initiated during early intervention visits while extending ECC instruction beyond direct service time. These structured tools support foundational domains such as communication, early literacy, social interaction, and emerging self-determination by providing accessible explanations, modeling home-based strategies, and offering opportunities for repeated engagement (see Table 1).

In practice, structured tools can support early childhood transition by reinforcing key instructional priorities. They can provide family-friendly

explanations of eye conditions that align with terminology introduced during IFSP meetings, support home-based adaptations that extend learning between visits, introduce early literacy concepts through engaging activities such as braille exploration, and normalize blindness and deafblindness through shared narratives and lived experiences. When used intentionally, APH structured tools help families move from passive recipients of information to active participants in their child's development.

For itinerant providers with limited weekly contact, assigning a single, aligned resource following a visit can extend instruction and maintain continuity. For school-based teams preparing children for kindergarten entry, these tools can clarify expectations, reduce anxiety, and help families understand how foundational ECC skills intersect with classroom participation. In this way, tools serve not as replacements for professional expertise but as bridges that support continuity across early transitions.

Practical Strategy: After an IFSP meeting, select one aligned APH ConnectCenter resource and model how the family can use it at home (see Table 1). Follow up at the next visit by asking what was helpful and reinforcing the same concept through instruction.

Elementary and Middle School: Building Adjustment and Identity

Marcus, a sixth grader with progressive vision loss, began middle school determined not to stand out. He avoided using his monocular in class and hesitated to request enlarged materials, despite clear need. Over time, his grades began to decline, not due to lack of ability but due to reduced access to instructional materials. In a small-group session focused on self-determination, Marcus was introduced to narratives of adults who are blind describing how and when they requested accommodations. Initially quiet, he later reflected, "They don't sound embarrassed. They just sound normal." This shift in perception created space for him to begin practicing his own self-advocacy. Within the following week, he rehearsed a simple request for digital materials and began applying it in class.

Transitions during the elementary and middle school years often center on increasing independence, expanding social expectations, and the development of personal identity. As academic demands grow and peer relationships become more complex, students with disabilities must navigate not only access to curriculum but also their role within social and educational environments. During this phase, ECC domains such as social interaction, self-determination, and assistive technology become increasingly visible, as students begin to recognize differences in access and develop strategies to manage those differences.

The vignette example illustrates how adjustment and identity development are closely tied to opportunities for exposure, reflection, and guided practice. Adjustment resources available through APH ConnectCenter can support these processes by providing structured opportunities to explore topics such as understanding vision changes, developing independent living strategies, navigating peer interactions, and building connections with broader communities. These resources are most effective when integrated intentionally into instruction, paired with guided discussion, role-play, and reflection aligned to measurable IEP goals (see Table 1).

For students who are deafblind, transitions often require additional layers of support, particularly in areas such as communication access, technology use, and group participation. Structured tools can provide thematic guidance but must be adapted to ensure accessibility and relevance for each learner. Across both itinerant and school-based service models, consistent language and expectations are critical. When educators reinforce strength-based messaging around independence and advocacy, students are more likely to internalize these concepts and apply them across settings (Wolffe & Rosenblum, 2014).

Practical Strategy: Pair self-advocacy instruction with a short narrative or video, then guide students in practicing one accommodation request using their own language within the session.

High School: Transition and Employment Infrastructure

By secondary school, transition planning becomes more formally embedded within educational programming. Postsecondary goals are identified, Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) are introduced (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014), and self-determination instruction becomes more explicit (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011). Despite this increased structure, the presence of documented goals does not guarantee meaningful skill development. Students often require repeated, scaffolded opportunities to explore career options, practice communication, and connect their strengths to real-world contexts.

Aisha, a high school junior, consistently expressed an interest in attending college and working with animals. While her transition plan reflected a general postsecondary goal, she struggled to articulate specific strengths, identify accommodations, or describe potential career pathways. During structured transition sessions, she engaged with short career narratives featuring professionals who are blind working in related fields. Prior to viewing, she identified a focus question: how these professionals navigated tasks requiring visual information. Afterward, she reflected on how one individual clearly communicated task adaptations to colleagues. This observation became the foundation for developing her own accommodation script for future academic settings.

Aisha's vignette highlights the importance of structured, guided engagement rather than passive exposure. Transition, career exploration, and employment resources available through APH ConnectCenter can support this work by providing access to diverse career pathways, modeling disability disclosure, and reinforcing workplace communication skills (see Table 1). When used intentionally, these tools support ECC domains such as self-determination and career education by facilitating structured reflection, guided discussion, and application.

Effective use of structured tools often follows a consistent instructional routine. Educators may begin by establishing a clear purpose, engage students with a brief and targeted resource, facilitate focused discussion, and conclude with an application activity that connects learning to individual goals. This instructional routine helps ensure that tools function as instructional infrastructure rather than supplemental content. For itinerant providers, APH resources help sustain continuity between sessions. For school-based teams, they provide a shared framework for reinforcing transition skills across staff members.

Practical Strategy: Use a structured routine of preview, engage, discuss, and apply when incorporating career exploration tools to ensure alignment with measurable transition goals.

Adult Adjustment and Late-Onset Vision Loss

Transition does not conclude with the completion of secondary education. Young adults entering postsecondary education, vocational training, or the workforce encounter new systems that often differ significantly from school-based supports. In some cases, individuals experience late-onset vision loss without a clear pathway for accessing services, creating abrupt and disorienting transitions. These experiences highlight the need for accessible, structured supports that extend beyond traditional educational settings.

I recall working with a young adult who experienced significant vision loss during her first year of college. She described feeling "between worlds," no longer connected to the supports she had in high school but not yet integrated into adult rehabilitation services. What she needed most in those early stages was not a checklist of services, but language to understand her experience, strategies to navigate daily tasks, and connections to others with similar lived experiences.

Structured tools and resources addressing adjustment, independent living skills, and rehabilitation orientation, including those developed through APH ConnectCenter, can provide critical entry points during these transitions (Table 1). Such tools support individuals in developing practical strategies, understanding available services, and building confidence as they navigate new environments. By

offering consistent, accessible information, these resources reduce isolation and support individuals in identifying next steps aligned with their goals.

Service Delivery Models: Extending Reach Without Adding Burden

Both itinerant and school-based service delivery models offer unique strengths while also presenting distinct challenges. Limited instructional time, increasing student needs, and extensive documentation requirements can restrict opportunities for repetition and reinforcement, which are essential for skill development. Within these constraints, educators must identify ways to extend the impact of their instruction without increasing workload.

Structured tools, including those developed through APH and ConnectCenter, provide one such approach by extending the reach of transition instruction beyond direct service time. Structured tools allow educators to reinforce terminology introduced during meetings, provide targeted follow-up aligned to specific goals, offer families clear next steps, and sustain instruction between sessions. Rather than adding new responsibilities, they support greater coherence and efficiency in existing practices.

Professional learning platforms such as APH Hive further enhance this work by strengthening educator capacity. Through free professional learning modules aligned with ECC domains and transition planning, all of which include continuing education units (CEUs), APH Hive supports professionals in translating theory into

practice. For educators managing complex caseloads, access to practical, immediately applicable strategies can significantly improve the consistency and effectiveness of instruction across settings.

Cultural Expectations and the Meaning of Independence

Transition planning is inherently collaborative and must reflect the values, expectations, and priorities of families. Cultural perspectives play a significant role in shaping how independence, interdependence, and adult outcomes are understood (Harry, 2008). While educational systems in the United States often emphasize individual autonomy, many families prioritize collective decision-making and interdependent living arrangements.

For example, a family may value continued residence within a multigenerational household as a marker of success, while school teams may emphasize independent living goals. Without intentional dialogue, these differing perspectives can create tension within transition planning. Structured tools can help bridge this gap by providing shared language, illustrating diverse pathways, and supporting conversations that honor both educational goals and family values.

When used thoughtfully, structured tools can encourage strengths-based discussions and support flexible definitions of independence that reflect cultural context. Rather than prescribing a single outcome, they create space for collaborative decision-making and mutual understanding.

Tools as Bridges Across the Lifespan

Across birth through early adulthood, transition remains a continuous process shaped by instruction, identity development, and collaboration. Structured tools, including those developed through APH and ConnectCenter, whether focused on early literacy, adjustment, career exploration, or professional learning, function most effectively when positioned as reinforcement rather than replacement.

Structured tools provide consistent language across systems, offer accessible information that families can revisit, support structured opportunities for developing self-determination, expand exposure to community and career pathways, and reinforce instruction between limited service sessions. When aligned with ECC domains and integrated into daily practice, they strengthen continuity across transitions and support meaningful skill development.

Transition is not a meeting. It is sustained instruction across the lifespan. Professionals' responsibility extends beyond documenting goals to ensuring that learners and families have the tools, language, and support necessary to navigate the environments in which they live, learn, and grow. Transition is not sustained through annual team meetings alone, but through the consistent, intentional use of tools that extend instruction into everyday life.

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