



Key points:

- **Observe student in different environments to determine likes, dislikes**
- **Gather input from student's family, teachers**
- **Find ways to include student in transition planning meeting**

Delve deeper to determine interests, preferences of student with severe disability

The IDEA requires districts to consider a student's interests and preferences when developing a [transition plan](#), regardless of the severity of her disability. [34 CFR 300.321](#) (b)(2).

How, then, can you find out what a student with severe disabilities wants and is able to do after high school if she is unable to articulate her own interests and preferences?

To start, don't assume that a student with severe disabilities cannot benefit from or contribute to transition planning, said attorney Heather Rutland of [Eichelbaum Wardell Hansen Powell & Mehl PC](#) in Austin, Texas.

Take these steps:

- **Notice student's preference for certain environments**

Observe the student in different environments to determine what she does and doesn't like, recommended Susan Loving, education specialist for transition at the [Utah State Board of Education](#).

Consider: What type of environment does the student seem to prefer? Does she work better one-on-one or in a group? Does she like repetitive tasks? What activities does she avoid?

Use this information to infer what kind of post-school options the student may be compatible with, Rutland said. For example, a student who enjoys working with blocks or Legos or who excels at games that involve spatial relationships may be well-suited for jobs involving sorting, stacking, and organizing, she said.

On the other hand, a student who needs a lot of prompting or rewards to complete a task that requires fine motor skills may be indicating that she prefers less detailed or intricate tasks, she said.

For students who are nonverbal, consider using pictures or other visual cues for the student to indicate her interests and preferences, Rutland said.

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- **Get input from student's family, teachers**

Parents and teachers usually know what makes a student "light up" even if she isn't able to articulate her thoughts and feelings verbally, Rutland said. For example, a teacher may know that one student loves music while another merely tolerates it.

Seek input on a student's preferences and dislikes, Loving said. Ask parents and teachers: How do you know when the student is happy? What calms the student? Consider using a conversation guide, such as the [Personal Preference Indicators](#), she suggested.

Also ask about a student's behavior, Rutland said. For example, a student with a history of wandering may not be suited for a job in landscaping, but he may excel in a nursery or greenhouse, she said. Look at the student's PT and OT evaluations, as well, to determine his physical and cognitive strengths and weaknesses, she said.

- **Involve student in transition planning meeting**

Keep in mind that the IDEA requires districts to invite students to their transition planning meetings. [34 CFR 300.321\(b\)\(1\)](#).

Find ways to let the student participate in the meeting, even if the severity of her disability poses a challenge, Rutland said. For example, a student can bring pictures of her interests to show to the transition team, Loving suggested. Or, she can press a button to advance the slides of a presentation about her interests and preferences, she said.

At the meeting, introduce the student to anyone who may be providing transition services, Rutland recommended.

"Often, the student will be working with someone from outside the school or someone unfamiliar to them," she said. "Beginning that introduction at the meetings can be an important start for building new relationships."

- **Be creative, explore all options**

When working with students with severe disabilities, err on the side of assuming they understand more than what an assessment may show they understand, Loving said.

Consider all avenues for the student to communicate, she said. For example, can he respond using AT? What does his body language indicate?

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In addition, think creatively when designing a transition plan for such students, Rutland said. There is no single way to assess or evaluate interests and preferences, she said. Modify assessments as needed to fit the student's needs, and rely on extrapolation to connect the student's strengths and weaknesses to potential postsecondary options, she said.

[Ragini Algole](#) covers postsecondary transition, charter school, and transportation issues for LRP Publications.

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