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## Evaluating Transition Programs for Students with Disabilities in a Midwest Suburban School District

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Evaluating Transition Programs for Students with Disabilities in a  
Midwest Suburban School District

by

Edward J. Rodgers

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

Evaluating Transition Programs for Students with Disabilities in a  
Midwest Suburban School District

by

Edward J. Rodgers

This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at Lindenwood University by the School of Education

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: Edward Joseph Rodgers

Signature:  Date: 04/21/2022

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## **Abstract**

This study aimed to address current support, the effectiveness of services, successful programs, critical resources, potential outcomes, and limitations for the school district's transition services through the program evaluation. The researcher developed a qualitative research study focusing on six research questions to provide recommendations on special education transition services for post-secondary success. The researcher and dissertation committee developed a survey distributed to 121 employees of the study's district. The minimum number of survey responses was surpassed by three, resulting in 33 responses. The survey questions gathered responses to provide information about the district's special education transition programs and services that prepare students for post-secondary life. The survey asked if the participant would volunteer for a follow-up interview with the researcher. If participants chose to be interviewed, they were required to leave their contact information which then opted them out of submitting the survey anonymously. All respondents who did not volunteer to participate for the interview within their survey response then submitted the survey anonymously. Of the 33 responses, 10 of the participants elected to volunteer in a follow-up interview to support the researcher's objective to identify additional and in-depth information regarding the key components of the school district's special education transition programs and services. Through the implementation of a survey and interviews, the researcher collected response data that developed common narratives to support each of the research questions. After all surveys and interviews were recorded, the researcher connected each research question to responses generated from the survey and interviews. The researcher aligned the response data from both data collecting tools to the most appropriate research

question(s) to support the researcher with accurate information that supported evidence for making recommendations. The researcher successfully discovered imperative resources needed for post-secondary transition and potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. The program evaluation's response data supported the researcher's conclusion that the study's school district provides effective transition services but has limitations that restrict the services from meeting the full potential and supporting additional students.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Background of Study**

Special Education is specially designed instruction for students identified with an educational disability. Federal regulations require public schools to provide students with disabilities with a free and appropriate education by completing an individualized education plan (IEP) that outlines specialized instruction, accommodations, and/or modifications to address the disability and sustain a successful learning experience adequately. When a student turns 15 years old, school districts are obligated to lead the IEP team in developing a post-secondary transition plan that concentrates on employment, education/training, and independent living goals.

Students struggling in academics due to a disability may not be motivated or equipped to pursue the traditional college route after graduation. The school IEP team initiates post-secondary transition conversations and preparation during freshman year to ensure the student and family expectations are included. The team is also liable for aligning transition services that will assist the student in achieving post-secondary goals throughout high school. The post-secondary transition plans can change over time in high school based upon the students' interests, progress in skills, and available resources. Like the student IEP, the transition plan is also individualized to serve as a guide for supporting the student to have a productive life when exiting high school. The IEP team discusses post-secondary goals and considers the severity of the disability when designing the post-secondary goals. There are various avenues individuals with disabilities can explore after graduation. For students with significant disabilities, the goal may be to attend and volunteer at an Adult Day Program while working on skills

that promote independence and social engagement. When students are not ready for college, due to cognitive impairments, but have the skills to work, the post-secondary goal may be to earn competitive or supportive employment. After the IEP team determines the post-secondary goals, the group will assign transition activities/services to the school, student, parent, and outside agencies to support the goals.

The post-secondary transition plan is a critical segment of the student IEP and represents the final steps of the students' participation in public education. In many situations, parents/guardians have been supported by school districts for 15 or more years, and the exit can be scary for everyone involved. It is best to assist students and parents/guardians with the post-secondary transition by partnering with outside agencies before graduating to develop connections to provide resources after high school. The IEP team's objective during the senior year should be focused on delivering a seamless post-secondary transition.

The qualitative evaluation of the Midwest suburban school district's special education transition programs provided transparent data that exposed resources and gaps for promoting successful post-secondary transitions. The Midwest suburban school district is one of five school districts in its geographic county. The student population is just under 17,000 students in grades kindergarten through 12th, with 11% having an educational disability that requires special education services. The district consists of three early childhood centers, 10 elementary schools, five middle schools, three traditional high schools, and two alternative schools. The study focused on the three high schools and two alternative schools, resulting in approximately 5,500 students. The district where the study was completed had the following ethnicity within the student

population; 79% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 5% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 5% multi-racial.

The researcher designed the study to inquire qualitative data through survey responses and semi-structured interviews to expose critical resources and limitations of post-secondary transition programs. The Midwest suburban school district has various transition programs and opportunities serving students with disabilities. The Individual Disabilities Education Act has 13 different disability categories that students may qualify through the evaluation process. The researcher attempted to detect if specific disability eligibility groups were being overlooked or not provided equitable opportunities in compresence to students in other disability categories. Historically, this specific school district provided students with disabilities opportunities for learning and sustaining post-secondary transition skills that address employment, education/training, and independent living.

The researcher asked specific questions to qualified staff/faculty that look further into requirements for participating in the transition programs/opportunities and securing outside agency supports. The school district is responsible for partnering with community members and/or outside agencies that continue post-secondary support upon high school graduation. The school district strives to collaborate with outside agencies when students turn age 16 to establish a relationship between the student, family, school, and outside agency. The researcher focused on gathering information from participants to help discover if students with disabilities are being supported with necessary and available resources for promoting a successful post-secondary transition. A successful post-secondary transition for students with disabilities is when students reach or surpass their

post-secondary goals documented in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The study evaluated the school district's supports, barriers, resources, effectiveness, and barriers for transition programs designated for students identified with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative investigation aims to distinguish resources and gaps for high school students receiving special education services in a Midwest suburban school district that influence a successful post-secondary transition. A successful post-secondary transition for students with disabilities is when students reach or surpass their post-secondary goals in Form C of the IEP. The study may include school staff/faculty that have experience providing instruction, supports, or served students eligible for special education services under IDEA. All participating staff have experience in post-secondary transitions for students with an educational diagnosis of Emotional Disturbances (ED), Intellectual Disabilities (ID), Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Autism, Other Health Impairments (OHI), or other IDEA eligibility categories.

The school district currently provides post-secondary transition plans for students identified in some of the disability categories. The district has established partnerships with community organizations, neighboring school districts, and other outside agencies to provide skills used in the post-secondary setting. The district implements applications for various transition experiences in partnership with neighboring school districts, such as; technical school and student internships. Not all students are ready to advance into an education or employment setting and require additional training upon completing high school. According to The Center for Parent Information & Resources (2016), depending

on the student needs, it can be beneficial for a transition team to include outside agencies to support the student with various opportunities based on individual plans.

Typically for students with complex disabilities who require additional training, the district can develop an individualized transition program. Creating an individualized transition program requires multiple partners, including the school district, adult day-habilitation program, and post-secondary funding agency. The study's research seeks success rates of current transition programs critical for developing a transparent understanding of the gaps and providing recommendations for improving programming for specific student groups who may be unsuccessful in post-secondary outcomes.

The researcher collected qualitative responses by surveying high school staff/faculty in Midwest suburban school district. The survey produced data that edifies the post-secondary transition supports for students with disabilities, the effectiveness of current transition opportunities and programs, critical resources for sustaining success after high school graduation, potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities, and notable limitations that cause transition programs to be unsuccessful. In addition to receiving qualitative responses from a survey, the researcher secured additional data by conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who indicated the willingness to participate when completing the survey. The interviews supported the study by providing basic demographics, effective supports for post-secondary transition, examples of supports the school/district provides students with disabilities in preparation for the post-secondary transition, key components for transition planning, barriers causing students not to meet post-secondary goals, significant community partnerships related to post-secondary transition, and reoccurring gaps between school/district and

community partner or outside agencies. The transition programs' success rates will be measured by identifying the participants' post-secondary outcomes in compresence with their Form C post-secondary goals.

### **Rationale of Study**

Students with physical, cognitive, and/or emotional disabilities are faced with various challenges when transitioning into post-secondary life. Individuals with disabilities traditionally experience challenges during transitions. A critical change for anyone is high school graduation and planning for post-secondary life. Alia Wong (2016) referred to statistics from a 2012 Bureau of Labor study that suggested that second to the disability, the largest gap for an individual to earn employment is the absence of training.

Cognitive and physical disabilities can also negatively provide individuals with additional limitations in the following areas; communicating with others, staying on-task physical stamina, short and long-term memory, work rate and accuracy, maturity, motivation, self-care skills, social behavior, and coping strategies. Schools need to continue supporting students on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) by implementing Form C (Post-secondary Transition Plan) into the IEP. The IEP team should review and revise Form C (with all sections of the IEP) annually with input from the student. Form C helps guide three post-secondary life domains: employment, education/training, and independent living (if necessary).

Each of the three areas documents a post-secondary goal with related activities. Currently, school districts are required to provide a level of transition services when a student is 15 years or older, and the intensity of the services needs to reflect the individual's skills to result in a seamless post-secondary transition. According to the



Center for Parent Information & Resources (2017), IDEA requires that school teams begin the transition plan for students before turning 16 years old.

Through experience in the classroom and administration, the researcher recommends seeking student achievement and outcome success rates for students with disabilities over the past five years. Analyzing the data will provide information that can be categorized by disability identification that will expose and isolate any common patterns for unsuccessful post-secondary transitions.

There are indications that schools provide exceptional transition services for some students with disabilities but are being challenged to deliver robust transition services for others. Some examples of these indications are based on previous research. For example, according to Koyanagi and Alfano (2013), students with emotional disturbances have the highest dropout rate compared to all other disability categories. Over the past five years, local special Education post-secondary transition officials have consistently worked with community partners to develop new transition programs and isolate resources to support transition in high schools. School transition experts also express the need to remove barriers that will deliver long-term resources and opportunities for students with ED, OHI, and other disability groups.

As part of the study, the researcher conducted a personal interview with Yuede, a high school transition specialist in a Midwest suburban school district. During the interview, Yuede described that in the past couple of decades, high school transition programs have cultivated and significantly grown opportunities for students with developmental disabilities. The special education transition programs offer a variety of practices and experiences to this population. However, high schools struggle to identify

conducive systems to support post-secondary transition for students with emotional disturbances. To adequately serve these students, schools need to understand the limitations emotional disturbances create regarding employability, independent living, and high education/training (R. Yuede, personal communication, December 2, 2020).

Within a Midwest suburban county, the researcher asked five school district transition representatives a question about training programs for their students, "What specialized post-secondary training programs does the district offer to students with emotional disturbances?" Four of the five school districts replied that no specialized programs existed, and one district opted not to respond. School districts in Midwest suburban areas are still seeing limited opportunities to provide students with ED meaningful experiences that support a seamless post-secondary transition. The long-term impact of not having appropriate post-secondary transition programs for these students goes beyond immediate graduation; it can contribute to a lifetime of unsuccessful patterns and events. Students with ED, OHI, etc., need post-secondary training that provides employment, education, and independent living skills. Determining which programs exist could provide the knowledge and confidence to develop more contributing members of society. In addition to exposing gaps in transition services, research and data collection from exceeding services will be used to guide future recommendations.

### **Research Questions**

*Research Question 1:* How do public high schools in a Midwest suburban school district support post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?

*Research Question 2:* How effective are the current transition programs and opportunities for students with disabilities?

*Research Question 3:* What public high school transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district have successfully supported students with disabilities to a post-secondary program?

*Research Question 4:* What critical resources influence individuals' with disabilities sustainability to be successful after high school graduation?

*Research Question 5:* What are the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities?

*Research Question 6:* What are the most significant barriers that cause transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district to be unsuccessful?

### **Study Limitations**

*Limitation 1:* The process's maturation poses a threat to the validity of the pandemic, causing closures of post-secondary transition programs and limiting resources for students with disabilities.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 1:* Prolonged Involvement. As the researcher, being involved in the environment can reduce the chance of seeking data from sources with limited opportunities. In addition, being involved in the research, the researcher can provide reliable data to uphold valid information.

*Limitation 2:* Special education services and post-secondary transition frequently change subjects; this may influence the validity of the instrumentation, observers, or outcomes over time.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 2:* Peer Debriefing. Interviewing school administrators, special education teachers, and transition specialists will support

this study's validity. Having conversations and dialogue with professionals currently in this study will be critical for its validity.

*Limitation 3:* The selection of comparison groups (students with disabilities) and maturation of post-secondary opportunities not having records of supporting each other may threaten the study's validity.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 3:* Triangulation. The information will come from study strategies such as semi-structured interviews, expert interviews, and archival research when researching this information. Comparing the three sources will provide confidence in selecting the data for analysis.

*Limitation 4:* The selection of comparison groups (students with various disability categories) and maturation of post-secondary opportunities not having records of supporting each other may threaten the study's validity.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 4:* Negative Case Analysis. Analyzing the data that does not reflect the trends or patterns can provide different insights for the additional data by highlighting similarities exposed through the data source that opposes the majority.

*Limitation 5:* The selection of subjects may have varying identifications from different social-emotional backgrounds, causing potential issues for comparison groups.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 5:* Triangulation. The information will come from multiple data sources across various schools. Comparing the three authorities will provide confidence in selecting the data for analysis.

**Definition of Terms**

*Adult Day Habilitation Programs:* Day Services support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, behavioral challenges and medically complex conditions. Individuals in adult day programs have opportunities to enjoy fun activities, discover new hobbies and make friends. They're also able to build skills to become more independent in their home communities (Day Services, 2021).

*Alternative Learning Center (ALC):* Formerly the ACE Program, is an alternative setting and style of learning for sixth through twelfth-grade students who have been removed from school on a long term suspension. Students are referred to the ALC following a Committee on Conduct Hearing resulting in a long-term suspension. Some students who have experienced success in the Alternative Learning Center may appeal to the School District Superintendent of Schools to remain at the ALC through graduation (Alternative Programs, 2020).

*Alternative Programs:* Alternative Education is for students needing a different environment than is offered through the regular high school schedule. The programs have limited enrollment making for a closer school community (Alternative Programs, 2020)

*At-Risk Students:* At-risk students are students whose educational outcomes are in jeopardy because they are experiencing academic deficits, have become disillusioned with school and learning, or are impacted by other factors that impede educational and social development (Alternative Programs, 2020).

*Compulsory Education* is the name given to the legally-required period of time that children are expected to attend school. In the western world, these laws generally require that children attend school from the ages of five to 18. This corresponds to the

standard K-12 school system found in much of Europe as well as North and South America. While there are exceptions to these laws (such as homeschooling or specific religious exemptions), the consensus is that children need to have a strong foundational education to allow them to succeed and be model citizens (Compulsory Education: Definition, Laws, & History 2015).

*Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR):* The Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation program assists eligible persons with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining quality employment (Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2021).

*Developmental Disabilities:* a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas. These conditions begin during the developmental period, may impact day-to-day functioning, and usually last throughout a person's lifetime (Crocker & Rubin, 1989).

*District Alternative High School:* The alternative high school provides a smaller learning environment for students considered credit deficient. The school is designed to meet the needs of at-risk students. Students attending the district alternative high school follow the same curriculum as other district high schools. However, a variety of instructional strategies are used to enhance student success. Students have a blended curriculum where some courses are taken using a computer and specialized software. This computer-based program provides core curriculum and assessment tools to match all students' skill levels, whether on a developmental, remedial, or enhanced learning track. The school day is also structured differently than a conventional high school. School hours are shortened on a four-block schedule routine (Alternative Programs, 2020).

*Emotional Disturbance (ED):* Emotional disturbance (ED) also known as emotional/behavioral disturbance (EBD) means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors, an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances, a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Montana School Health, 2020).

*Form C (Post-Secondary Transition Plan):* The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) contains Form C that pertains to students starting at 15 years old. Form C is an organized plan that supports the student transition from high school to post-secondary life, focusing on the areas of employment, education/training, and independent living. The IEP team develops the transition plan together and documents each of the required transition services the student will receive.

*Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):* The Section 504 regulation requires a school district to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to each qualified person with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the person's disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP):* An IEP is a legal document that clearly defines how a school plans to meet a child's unique educational needs that result from a disability. The IEP is the cornerstone of a child's special education program. The goals of

an IEP are twofold: to set reasonable, measurable goals for the child and to also specify the services the school will provide (Mulvahill, 2018).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):* The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special Education and related services to those children. The IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special Education, and related services to more than 7.5 million (as of school year 2018-2019) eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

*Intellectual Disability:* Intellectual disability means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, which adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term "intellectual disability" was formerly termed "mental retardation" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019).

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):* LRE is part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA says that children who receive should learn in the least restrictive environment. This means they should spend as much time as possible with peers who do not receive special Education (Morin, 2020).

*Local Educational Agency (LEA):* As defined in ESEA, a public board of Education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties



that is recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020)

*Mental Illnesses:* Mental Illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these). Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020).

*Midwest Suburban School District:* A school district located in the Middle Western portion of the United States and primarily serves an education to students outside of the urban and rural regions.

*Missouri Options (MO Opts):* The Missouri Option Program, sponsored by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, is for students ages 17 to 20 who have the capabilities to complete Missouri high school graduation requirements, but for a variety of reasons lack the credits needed to graduate with their class and are at risk of leaving school without a high school diploma. The Missouri Option program provides seniors at risk of not graduating or dropping out an alternative opportunity to earn a high school diploma. Also, the program offers those students who have dropped out an opportunity to return to school to earn a high school diploma. Each student interested in the Missouri Option program will be considered on a case-by-case basis. The program provides an opportunity for these students to earn a high school diploma by meeting the specific requirements (Alternative Programs, 2020).

*Multiple Disabilities:* means concomitant impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness or intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special

education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities does not include deaf-blindness (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019).

*Other Health Impairment (OHI):* means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that— (i) Is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and (ii) Adversely affects a child's educational performance (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019).

*Post-secondary Transition:* Post-secondary transition planning are efforts by school staff to prepare students for positive post-secondary outcomes including post-secondary Education and employment. Doing so may also include connecting students and their families to community services and supports, as well as planning for housing, transportation, and other needs (Palmon et al., 2017).

*Pre-Missouri Options (Pre-Opts):* The Pre-Missouri Option program provides juniors at risk of not graduating or dropping out an alternative opportunity to earn a high school diploma. The program offers these students an opportunity to prepare themselves for the Missouri Option Program during their senior year (Alternative Programs, 2020).

*Reasonable Accommodations.* Covered entities must provide reasonable accommodations that enable qualified job applicants and employees with disabilities to participate in the application process, to perform essential job functions, and receive benefits and privileges equal to those of job applicants and employees without

disabilities. In addition, covered entities must provide reasonable accommodations to the known physical or mental limitations of an otherwise qualified registrant, eligible registrant, or participant with a disability in order to enable the individual to enjoy the benefits and privileges equal to those of other registrants, eligible registrants, and participants without disabilities. Covered entities are not required to provide any accommodation that would impose an undue hardship on the operation of their organization (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

*Sheltered Workshop (Facilitated Employment Centers):* a place of employment for persons with disabilities where their rights are protected and their needs are met (Sheltered Workshop, 2021)

*Specific Learning Disabilities:* a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019).

*Transition Programs:* Transition programs are programs designed to teach independent living skills, including vocational skills, to students receiving special education services. The goal of the Transition Programs is to help students become as independent as possible, including securing competitive employment (Transition Program, 2020).

*Transition Skills:* Transition skills are those abilities which allow individuals to positively navigate myriad, complex changes including those in higher education and

beyond. They can be regarded as skills which empower individuals such as students to effectively manage change (Clafferty & Beggs, 2016).

*Trauma Informed Practices:* Trauma informed practice is an organizational structure and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma. Trauma Informed Practice also emphasizes physical, psychological and emotional safety for both patients and providers, and helps survivors rebuild a sense of control and empowerment (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020).

### **Summary**

The researcher will answer the research question by surveying and interviewing school faculty/staff members who have experience transitioning students with disabilities into the post-secondary setting. The researcher will email district faculty/staff information about the research subject, a plea for assistance, and a link to complete a survey for additional information concerning the study. Within the survey, participants will have the option to further partake in the analysis by providing additional contact information with informed consent. The researcher may use the contact information to seek more specific details about subjects or research to support transparent evidence for the study.

The potential benefits to society and the public school system are improving post-secondary outcomes for adults with disabilities. Individuals with developmental, physical, cognitive, emotional, or multiple disabilities frequently exhibit functions that impede the ability to pursue a purposeful post-secondary life. When students choose

educational systems and settings, it promotes learning experiences and behavior development.

The study aims to isolate the strengths and gaps for transition services within the public school system. The study will reveal specific challenges and equip professionals with data to allocate resources to best support the student transition needs. The study's objective is to use the information to implement resources to address the gaps for students with disabilities before exiting high school. The proposed research and analysis will present evidence to prioritize resources to support students in all disability categories for post-secondary success. Collecting testimonies and data of current practices and programs will promote the approach of expanding specialized applications purveying to the inadequacies of any specific disability category. If public schools use the research, data, analysis, and recommendations for implementing these explicit transition services, all students with disabilities will have adequate programming to support successful post-secondary life. Potential high school graduates will have opportunities to learn essential skills for improving self-confidence, living independently, and self-avocation. If more high school students with disabilities can gain these post-secondary skills, it may increase employment rates and decrease crime in communities. The proposed study provides an opportunity to positively impact special education services, public schools, and society.

## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

### Introduction

When adult-age students graduate from high school, they begin their post-secondary transition. The three fundamental scopes schools focus on to equip students for the transition are employment, education/training, and independent living. During the years an individual spends in high school, the school should be endowing growth and development to promote a seamless post-secondary transition for all pupils. Students receiving special education services typically have additional challenges with the post-secondary transition, requiring additional services to support their individualized education plan (IEP). Special education references various school services to individualize a student's education, based on the individual's disability (Morin, 2021). Prior to the 19th century, special schools were enabled to educate children with disabilities (Lacey, n.d.). Over time, special education evolves to improve students receiving special education services through multiple law changes. Aligning with the historical pathways of special education, the post-secondary transition process in special education has also been a significant focus for improvement. The transition planning of the IEP team is a complex conversation that focuses on specific goals. The team discusses which services, programs, and opportunities are appropriate for students to achieve post-secondary goals (Lee, 2021). Special education's advancements for succeeding in all academic, therapeutic, and post-secondary transition services are monumental for individuals with disabilities to achieve the goals of living a fulfilling life.

### **Organization of the Literature Review**

The literature review includes a brief history of the litigation for special education's progression to providing students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) within the least restrictive environment (LRE). In addition to the history of special education, the review outlines the transformation of post-secondary transition for students with disabilities. Following the history of post-secondary transition, the researcher includes characterizations of various transition programs and services contributing to schools for delivering individuals' specialized skills and support for achieving post-secondary goals. Finally, the research summarizes the myriad of educational disabilities and discusses how each of the disabilities can impact a student's post-secondary transition.

### **Outlining Special Education's History**

Special Education services have been around since the 1700s, serving individuals with disabilities. For centuries, various legislation continued to advance the delivery of special education and expectations for an adequate education. Like general education, school leaders learn new information and perceptions for best practices with time. Throughout the history of special education, the trend of providing an inclusive and robust education for individuals with disabilities is present. Special education's history is similar to those with a disability. In the beginning, there is a deficiency, and over time, specific resources unite, formulating supports to elevate awareness resulting in growth for the areas of challenges. Looking further into the origin and iconic models of special education, Mock et al. (n.d.) stated the following:

Special education, as its name suggests, is a specialized branch of education. Claiming lineage to such persons as Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1775–1838), the physician who "tamed" the "wild boy of Aveyron," and Anne Sullivan Macy (1866–1936), the teacher who "worked miracles" with Helen Keller, special educators teach those students who have physical, cognitive, language, learning, sensory, and/or emotional abilities that deviate from those of the general population. Special educators provide instruction specifically tailored to meet individualized needs, making education available to students who otherwise would have limited access to education. (para. 1)

Mock et al. (n.d.) referenced two crucial moments in special education history when discussing Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and Helen Keller's teacher, Sullivan Macy. In earlier periods, society was uncertain how to teach or care for individuals with significant disabilities, but progressive scholars like Itard and Macy deliver an effective education when others could not.

In current times, special education within public education systems is more advanced, diverse, and educated to provide special education services to individuals with disabilities, compared to previous centuries; however, it still has the capacity for improvements.

Special educators are accountable for various responsibilities, such as providing instruction in core subject fields, social skills, executive functioning, transition skills, and other life preparation domains. In addition to providing several domains of instruction, special educators are often responsible for organizing and leading individualized education plan (IEP) meetings, completing paperwork within deadlines, reviewing



existing data for the student evaluation process, and other imperative components within the realm of fulfilling the duties of special education teacher in 2021. When analyzing the teachers' workload, there is frequent questioning whether it is realistic to complete the list of responsibilities, while implementing an appropriate education. Are the professional requirements for special educators interfering with their preparation to generate an adequate education for students with individuals with disabilities? Researchers believe that offering professional development for special education teachers can produce opportunities for teachers to focus on common challenges within the classroom. After collaborating and identifying barriers to learning, teachers can use data for making informative decisions to implement best practices that address the challenges. Data-Based Decision Making (DBDM) is when experts research, collect, analyze, and summarize essential data related to a future decision. After synthesizing the summarization of data, experts can apply a practical decision to make more effective decisions. Wilcox et al. (2021) shared the following:

While data are an important component of DBDM, decision makers must interpret the data to inform decisions about how to effectively support students. Data must be combined with pedagogical and content knowledge to translate it into a usable action plan, taking the context into consideration. (p. 3)

The implementation of education programs provides influential learning events addressing student challenges and disabilities. In addition to offering programs, new or initial teachers need to continue participating in internship placements that provide real-life scenarios. The internships will support the teacher in understanding the practicalities and skill sets necessary to adequately lead a special education classroom (Aldabas, 2020).

The 19th century began the initiation of compulsory education and student assessments. The assessment generated a process to exit students with disabilities from traditional schools to attend a special school or have them remain at home (Borsay, 2012). By 1918, a series of Acts were passed that required grant-aides to establish charitable schools for individuals with disabilities (Borsay, 2012). The Education Act of 1944 is a significant part of Special Education's history. The act recognized that the traditional public-school environment was the most effective setting for students with disabilities whenever possible. However, according to Borsay (2012) "the number of pupils in special schools increased from 38,499 in 1945 to 106,367 in 1972" (p. 1). The increase in students attending special schools indicates that the school system was identifying more students to attend separate education settings and contradicting the legislation of the 1944 Education Act.

According to the History of Special Education (2021), in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that did not enforce education for students with disabilities, but did allocate funds to state schools to educate individuals with disabilities. One decade later, in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) and Public Law 92-142 were passed. The EAHCA is the initial law that required local education authorities (LEA) to provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities. FAPE is a term coined by EAHCA that implements an individualized education program (IEP) that outlines the individual's disability with a description of services as an educational benefit in preparation for future learning and post-secondary life (Learn About). A significant portion of ensuring FAPE is that the educational placement is the students' LRE. The

LRE is critical for the academic and social growth of students with disabilities. Providing students with disabilities access to learn within the regular education setting as frequently as possible when appropriate is a crucial responsibility for schools. Students with disabilities are entitled to receiving accommodations and/or modifications to support limitations of barriers that may interfere with their participation in the regular education setting.

The Handicapped Children's Protection Act of 1986 is a change and amendment to the 1975 Education of the Handicapped Act from President Ronald Regan. The amendment aims to offer parents/guardians of students with disabilities further participation in developing their child's individualized education program (IEP). The new act also provides additional incentives to parents/guardians if there is evidence the child was not receiving a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) from the local education authorities (LEA). The H.R. 1523 - 99th Congress 1985-1986: Handicapped Children (1985) suggests that if a student with a disability is denied or not provided FAPE through the office of civil rights, the LEA may be subject to discriminating against an individual with a disability. If the LEA is found guilty of infringing upon the Education of the Handicapped Act, the parents/guardians recuperate the appropriate attorney's fees and expenses.

In 1990, Congress reauthorized the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA continued EAHCA's objective to provide and protect the education rights for children with disabilities and focus on providing equitable learning possibilities for students with and without disabilities. IDEA's reauthorization of Public Law 110-476 implemented

several additions, including two disability categories: Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Autism.

IDEA also focused on increasing the Local Educational Authorities' (LEA) responsibilities to implement transition services to students ages 15 to 21. The mandate would include an additional section of the IEP, known as the post-secondary transition plan. The plan's development is through the IEP team members who document decisive post-secondary life components upon high school graduation. Typically, when a student enters high school, the LEA becomes responsible for leading the IEP team in developing a post-secondary transition plan. The transition plan includes appropriate employment, education/training, and independent-living goals supplemented with transition services for addressing each of the three goals. When a student is eligible for transition services, the LEA is liable for linking the student to local post-secondary agencies that can continue to provide supports after graduation.

IDEA reiterates the right for students with disabilities to access the general education setting and/or curriculum as the least restrictive environment (LRE) when appropriate. Kauffman et al. (2019) noted that "LRE is (a) rendered irrelevant and (b) the continuum is moot only when (a) a single environment is considered least restrictive in all cases and (b) there is no continuum and no choice of alternative environments—just one place" (p. 32). When considering an education placement, the term "appropriate" can be challenging to define if the team is basing the decision on the student's abilities. The determination for educational placement, special education services, and general education access is a recommendation from the IEP team. The educational placement in the IEP can have various supports for restricting the environment when the IEP team

determines placement. For students with severe intellectual disabilities, the LRE may exclude the general education setting or curriculum. There are scenarios when students have complex cognitive impairments that disrupt an ability to be actively engaged in the general education environment. Although IEP teams prioritize the LRE, it is not a violation for a student to be entirely in the special education setting when the team deems it appropriate for the individual's academic and emotional well-being.

In 2001, President George W. Bush's initiation for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The NCLB sanctioned several federal education programs to be administrated by the states. The focus of the new legislation was to close student achievement gaps in the areas of math and reading for students in grades 3 through 8. The proposed outcome of NCLB was for all students to meet or exceed the state standards by 2014. Congress included students with disabilities and identified students with disabilities as a subgroup, as part of the NCLB. The law includes the requirement of students with disabilities to participate in state-standardized assessments with the accommodations and modifications within the IEP. The act references that students with disabilities will measure progress in an alternate assessment. The assessments are requirements for all students to participate; the IEP team cannot excuse a student's participation but can decide how the student will participate in the assessments (Yell et al., 2006). There is an argument on the NCLB act as to whether the law affects special education positively or negatively. The ideology for increasing expectations for students with disabilities and upholding them to the same standard of students without disabilities is positive because it exemplifies equality. The debate gains traction because the standardized exams that assess each students' baseline

and progress are always accurate for students with disabilities when indenting academic growth (Gensler, 2005). The NCLB act had multiple flaws, some of which specifically fall in the area of special education. A vital issue of the act is expecting students with and without disabilities to progress at similar rates. The identification of students with disabilities takes place through the evaluation process. If the process determines a disability, the IEP team collaborates to document the appropriate specialized instruction and/or related services to be compliant with the legislation of IDEA. Designing educational goals for every child across all ability levels and expecting a corresponding academic achievement rate of progress is unrealistic. Gensler (2005) suggested, "A possible modification would be to create more achievable standards for these students based on the goals in their IEP" (p. 13). The NCLB is another critical movement that impacts special education in various ways.

The legal changes and the addition of NCLB caused IDEA to be reauthorized in December 2004 by President George W. Bush. The changes in IDEA reflected No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to increase expectations for students to achieve high levels of learning by requiring educators to implement proven practices and instructional materials. The change in law also aimed to offer more flexibility to states and school districts in exchange for additional accountability (Boundy 2006). The updates to IDEA continue with newly elected officials. The incorporation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 updated the NCLB act. On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed ESSA, that reauthorized the No Child Left Behind Act. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2020), the most recent authorization for IDEA law states:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. (para. 6)

A key highlight was the approach for justice to support critical protections for student subgroups, such as at-risk, high-needs, and special education. The ESSA sustains the objective to ensure all students are successful in school and are prepared to make career selections in their post-secondary life. President Obama's reauthorized law directed schools to engage in robust programming for all students, especially students who benefit from rote learning versus higher-order skills (Malin et al., 2017). These learners are frequently students in special education and access the general education curriculum with accommodations and/or modifications. The ESSA's aim to increase meaningful post-secondary opportunities for all students significantly impacts students with disabilities and those who may require an alternative learning experience. The result of the ESSA empowers schools to be creative and develop opportunities for all students to learn about post-secondary employment from beyond the classroom. Malin et al. (2017) stated, "We detect within ESSA an expansive concept of meaningful learning that extends outside the school (e.g., internships, on-the-job training, job shadowing) and that is often preparatory in nature" (p. 821). Although the NCLB act has positive intentions and increases expectations for students in special education, the ESSA's focus to differentiate, individualize, and redefine success continues to pay dividends for equipping students with disabilities toward adult life.

Historically there is an abundance of laws sanctioning to support and protect special education in public schools. Dating back to the 1700s, most professionals did not have the skills or knowledge to teach an individual with disabilities, which frequently led to a less than adequate education or no education. During the 19th century, the compulsory education requirement redirects individuals with disabilities to attend special schools to receive an education. Compulsory education is not a move that promotes inclusiveness but a transition to provide a place for learning. Progressing into 1944, the Education Act recognized the importance for students in special education to be included in the traditional school when appropriate. The Education Act is a move for supporting special education; the Education for All Handicapped Children of 1975 requires students with disabilities to access a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) by the local education authorities (LEA). After reauthorizing EAHC in 1986 the Handicapped Children's Protection Act, parents/guardians had additional input for implementing their student's IEP. As time moves forward and laws change, the consistent theme is evolving special education to be inclusive, while providing the necessary resources.

The origination of IDEA is a defining law requiring the LEA to provide equal learning opportunities for individuals with disabilities compared to peers without disabilities. Although many view the No Child Left Behind Act as a regressive action for special education, it advocates for high expectations from all students, including those with disabilities. The most recent reauthorization of NCLB is the Every Child Succeeds Act (ECSA), which serves and supports special education in various facets, especially in providing meaningful post-secondary knowledge. Leaders continue to learn and update



laws that support students' academic, social/emotional, and physical well-being in special education. Kirby (2016) shared the following:

Special education legislation has evolved. There is much to be applauded during this time, and students with learning disabilities have benefitted from these advancements. Students with learning disabilities should now be included to the greatest extent possible with their peers. The evolution of public policy has positively affected students; however, much work needs to be completed to move towards the socially-constructed definition of disability and its manifestation in the classroom. The movement away from the medical model may result in a completely inclusive classroom where labels of disabilities are not needed for access to the curriculum. A curriculum that does not pathologize disabilities would look at the individual need of students. Teacher recognition of the unique needs of every learner can meet the individualization created by an IEP. (p. 179)

Special education has a long history that shows growth over time. Education and political leaders consistently evaluate best practices for all learning to improve the public education system for all students.

### **History of Post-Secondary Transition for Individuals with Disabilities**

Post-secondary transition refers to students' moving from high school to the following stages in life: employment, education/training, and independent living. The post-secondary employment sector guides students in pursuing a work opportunity, such as volunteering, facility-based employment, supportive employment, or competitive employment, all of which serve a different population of individual ability. Post-secondary education/training provides opportunities for continuing education through

adult day programs, on-the-job training, college, technical school, or other post-secondary education/training systems that equip individuals for employment. Not all students with disabilities require specific goals and plans to address independent living. However, students with significant impairments typically incorporate independent living in their post-secondary transition plan to support future preparation for the student and family. Providing transition services to students with disabilities offers skills and resources that lead to the student being as independent and productive in society as possible. Many students entering their senior year have an idea of what the future may have in store for them. However, this is not always the case. There is a fear of not knowing the next step that captures parents/guardians and their children. The people who experience barriers of post-secondary transition frequently support a student with a disability. One of the school's responsibilities is developing and implementing a post-secondary transition plan for all students with an individualized education program (IEP). Although the post-secondary transition plan is a federal requirement today, that has not always been the case in special education. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1990 is the initiating mandate that focuses on increasing the quality of post-secondary life for students with disabilities (McDonnell et al., 2010). Various events and moments in special education's history are responsible for developing and improving post-secondary transition services for students with disabilities.

A key component of post-secondary transition is independent living. Individuals with disabilities often require supports for living on their own. Promoting individuals with physical and/or cognitive impairments has not always been an embracing action from cultures and communities. According to the History of Independent Living (2017),

"History shows people with disabilities have been defined as objects of shame, fear, pity, or ridicule. People with disabilities have been confined, sometimes for life, in state institutions and nursing homes" (para. 1). Before 1970, individuals with significant disabilities were often victims of institutionalization, due to a lack of knowledge and opportunities to support the people in need. According to Scott et al. (2008),

At the end of June 1967, the deinstitutionalization of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities began as a national phenomenon in the United States.

In June 1967, the annual census of state institutions then conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) indicated that there were 194,650 residents of state institutions for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. That was the highest total in history. (p. 402)

Society is continuing to evolve and progress to a more inclusive environment for all people. In 1972, the initiation of Ed Roberts to lead the establishment of the Berkeley Center for Independent Living (CIL) was a significant movement in history. The Berkeley Center was the first center for an independent living program to support individuals with disabilities. Zukas (1975) shares, "The Center for Independent Living came into existence as a formal entity in March 1972, but its origins extend considerably further back in time and place; on occasion fortuitous circumstance has also played a role" (para. 1). CIL portrays a movement versus a specific establishment for its time to alter societal practices by introducing a new ideology that does not align with previous opinions. CIL may have opened in 1972, but it took over a decade for the movement to come to fruition as a welcoming opportunity in society. CIL The objective for developing an independent living center is to offer peer support and role modeling, while operating

the programs by individuals with disabilities (History of Independent Living, 2017). Over the next 30 years, hundreds more independent living centers began to open in the United States and worldwide to support individuals with disabilities (History of Independent Living, 2017). The movement to develop programs for assisting people with impairments is a significant mark in history, as a source for several laws and organizations to follow. The primary action of Ed Robert is a cornerstone to regulations and organizations that foster opportunities for individuals with disabilities to enhance their ability to be independent, confidently engage in society, and experience a fulfilling life with friends. Society remains to embark upon new opportunities and be creative in serving all people regardless of ability.

After deinstitutionalization and the first community for independent living organization, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 passed. Although the Act passed in 1973, it was not until 1977 when the law was active. Carmel (2020) wrote,

After twice being vetoed, the Rehabilitation Act was signed by President Richard M. Nixon. But four years later, the law had yet to be implemented. The cost to meet the new standards, which required retrofitting and fixing the many federally funded buildings around the country, would have been enormous, and as administrations changed, action was delayed for years. (para. 4)

On April 28, 1977, Section 504 Rehabilitation Act was officially in effect. The law protects the rights of those with visible and/or non-apparent disabilities in programs or organizations that receive supporting resources from the Federal government. The Section 504 Act itself also prevents discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Federally operated organizations must not discriminate by dismissing employees if they

can fulfill the job description's skill, experience, and educational qualifications and perform the necessary job functions with or without reasonable accommodations. Section 504 is a crucial movement for individuals with disabilities that supports many new opportunities for work and accessibility.

A foundation of Section 504 is its impact on public school systems and obligation to provide students with disabilities access to a free and appropriate education. Similar to the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Section 504 mandates that public school districts review each student individually and, if necessary, provide reasonable accommodations and/or modifications for the student to participate in the general education setting as frequently as possible. When students with disabilities do not have access to instruction or materials due to a disability, it can result in an Office of Civil Rights (OCR) complaint, which differs from a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) complaint. An OCR complaint is frequently a discrimination concern against a person based on their race, color, national origin, disability, age, or sex (OCR 2021). Public school districts need to ensure all students with Section 504 plans receive appropriate accommodations and/or modifications within their documentation.

In 1990 there were multiple legal movements to promote individuals with disabilities and support their post-secondary life. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) require documentation in each IEP for students 15 years old or older. Form C Post-Secondary Transition Plan was added to the IEP document to support students with disabilities to align post-secondary domains for employment, education/training, and independent living. The local education authorities (LEA) are responsible for documenting and providing transition services alongside the student, parent/guardian, and

outside agencies (Bateman, n.d.). Adding Form C to the IEP is a productive method for supporting students and their families with resources, connections, and/or plans to reach post-secondary goals.

Also, in 1990, President George H.W. Bush passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a reauthorization from the Civil Acts Rights Act of 1964 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The ADA focuses on equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities (Introduction to the ADA, n.d.). Later in 2008, the ADA expanded upon the law, which includes individuals with disabilities in college. The ADA is an important law because it provides checks and balances to organizations to provide reasonable accommodations to promote individuals with disabilities to engage in a more productive post-secondary life through education and/or employment. The ADA of 1990 focuses on mandating equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination in all public living areas, including employment, schools, transportation, and other environments open to the public. In 2008, the law's expansion to account for post-secondary education institutions, including the right to access reasonable academic accommodations and/or modifications, is known as the ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA).

Students with disabilities in high school typically require an IEP or 504 Plan to access the least restrictive environment within the school setting. Unlike a 504 Plan, an IEP does not transition with a student after high school graduation when seeking post-secondary education. For a student to receive accommodations and/or modifications that relate to a disability, the student must meet with the post-secondary institute's accessibility office or disability coordinator to provide documentation for a disability.

When a student reports a disability to a post-secondary education program, the ADA's objective for developing a plan prioritizes the specific accommodations and/or modifications necessary to access the education. According to Keenan et al. (2018), "The main purpose of documentation should now focus on how learning is impacted, rather than clearly documenting the existence of a specific disability" (p. 58). High school professionals are responsible for supporting students with a post-secondary transition plan with transition services in each identified area (employment, education/training, and independent living) on Form C Post-Secondary Transition Page of the IEP. A unique strategy high schools can implement to support students with a post-secondary education goal for higher education is to implement a 504 Plan before graduation. By implementing a 504 Plan, the student will then have the appropriate documented plan transferable to a post-secondary education program. Completing this process may also expedite the process of receiving supports after high school graduation.

The post-secondary transition from high school to a post-secondary education institute is critical for the student and IEP team. Keenan et al. (2016) stated, "Assurance that students leave high school settings with appropriate documentation in hand improves the chances of a smooth transition into and through the college experience" (p. 62). Requiring high schools to provide supports and transition plans to students with disabilities is imperative and necessary for many students. The American Disabilities Act is a law to support and protect individuals with disabilities who have the same opportunities as those without disabilities. The ADA provides insurance for protection against discrimination for a physical or mental disability. The ADA is a significant

movement to improve and expand post-secondary opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

In 1994, President Clinton signed the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STW) that seeks to improve the knowledge and skills of all students by incorporating occupational learning with traditional academics. The methodology for integrating school and work skills is to develop connections between secondary and post-secondary education programs. In many ways, it seems to make sense to have students learning occupational skills while engaging in the school lessons, specifically students with disabilities whose goal may be going directly into the workforce (Bryant & Kirk, 1997). Research by Bryant and Kirk (1997) provides a supportive outlook of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act when stating,

Tying classroom instruction to practice in the work environment is commonplace. Such practice is exemplified by cooperative education, field trips, and similar endeavors. At the post-secondary level, the practice is exemplified by cooperative education, allied health clinical experience, and comparable technical-vocational undertakings. Tech-prep education, school-to-apprenticeship, business-education contracts, and career academies are foundations on which school-to-work systems will be built. The exemplary nature of such practice was recognized in 1994 by the passage of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, which seeks to not only prepare people for employment and smooth the transition from school to work but also to provide a more solid framework within which such activities may occur.

(p. 89)



Engaging learners in academics while implementing transferable knowledge and/or skills for post-secondary work can significantly succeed for students. Many of the examples are strategies of practices our secondary education systems continue to see today. High school students frequently participate in occupational programs in high schools, such as technical schools, career centers, job trade programs, student internships, school-work programs, and other employment opportunities that demonstrate occupational skill learning while in the traditional school system. Although the STW seeks good intentions, there are many limitations to the Act. There were many limitations and conflicting laws. Bryant and Kirk (1997) stated, "Individuals involved in school-to-work endeavors are subject to a number of laws that impact such activities. The primary laws of concern are the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Federal Wage and Hour Act, and child labor laws" (p. 90).

Other laws develop barriers for students to participate in work programs without compensation. Additionally, depending on an individual's age, privacy regulations can cause a challenge to secure work skills while in school. Although the School-to-Work Opportunities Act ended in October 2021, it started a new awareness for education leaders. The STW is the initiation for many programs in school systems today and continues to have school professionals advocating for employment programs for students.

Employing individuals with disabilities has been an essential topic for nearly a half-century. The earlier laws include Section 504 and ADA to support a more inclusive employment atmosphere for individuals with disabilities. The organization and structure for developing the systems provide students in high school a seamless transition into an accessible employment setting. After ADA, the subsequent law embedded was the

Workforce Investment Partnership Act of 1998, which is currently the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). According to the Department of Labor, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) defines as the following,

WIOA is landmark legislation that is designed to strengthen and improve our nation's public workforce system and help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers. WIOA is designed to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy. Congress passed the Act with a wide bipartisan majority; it is the first legislative reform of the public workforce system since 1998. (paras. 1-2)

WIOA is a movement to provide work opportunities and pre-employment services to individuals with disabilities. The idea for providing pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities at a younger age can increase a more successful a post-secondary outcome (Pre-ETS 2021).

From 2002 to 2011, the employment outcomes for transition-age youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (TAY-ASD) were on the decline following the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services (Roux et al., 2018). VR services are imperative to individuals with disabilities to identify, secure, and sustain competitive employment after high school graduation and continue services as needed without expiration. Historically VR services begin for students (with disabilities) during the senior and occasionally during junior year of high school. The most recent change in law, WIOA, impacts VR

programs by incorporating early vocational preparation and employment supports from the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) that happen prior to VR services (Roux et al., 2018). WIOA's initiative for Pre-ETS is to concentrate on students with disabilities as early as 14 years old who are not eligible for VR services.

In addition to establishing new employment preparation services that reach more students, WIOA also limits facility-based workshops (sheltered workshops) focusing on the prevention of high schools placing students with disabilities in a sub-minimum wage employer (WIOA, 2014). The limitation of using facility-based employment centers as a resource and post-secondary goal for high school students with disabilities intends to promote inclusive opportunities. The focus of the WIOA to include more students in the realm of competitive employment and raising expectations for students to work in less restrictive environments may result in positive outcomes. Looking at the change in law from a different angle can cause IEP teams to struggle with an appropriate post-secondary employment goal if the student employability data does not recommend competitive employment. Updating the law and increasing federal-funded employment services through VR helps explain the differences in delivery of Pre-ETS (Miller et al., 2018). WIOA is the most recent litigation that society and school systems abide by today.

The post-secondary transition continues to evolve as time moves forward. Similar to the history of Special Education, the post-secondary transition continues to enhance its services and rights for individuals with disabilities with each law that passes. Post-secondary employment, education/training, and independent living opportunities are all in a different place from the 1970s and before. Society is emerging to develop regulations for supporting individuals who have physical and/or intellectual disabilities. Fifty years

ago, people were institutionalized for being different by having a disability. Today, the same individuals can access independent living programs, supportive living communities, vocational rehabilitation services, and accommodations on the job. In alignment with the public community, the school systems continue improving their post-secondary transition programming for students with disabilities. Federal, state, and local opportunities continue to grow in high schools, offering students new resources for promoting a successful post-secondary life.

### **Post-Secondary Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities**

When students are 15 years old and older, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that the student Individual Education Plan (IEP) incorporate the post-secondary transition plan. The plan consists of three domains, including employment, education/training, and independent living (if necessary). Each domain has a specific goal and transition services assigned to the IEP stakeholders; school, student, parent, and outside agency. The transition services can occur within a transition program while the student is in high school. There are various transition programs, and all can focus on different post-secondary goals, settings, and ambitions for life. Typically students with disabilities participating in a transition program spend part or all of their school day engaging in activities that pertain to employment, independent living, community, and social skills that will pay dividends in life after graduation. Post-secondary programming and planning are crucial components for the student and IEP team to develop as the initial stage to secure a successful adult life beyond high school.

When IEP teams begin post-secondary transition planning, it is imperative not to overlook the details and importance that the plan frequently requires students with lower

needs and higher incidence disabilities to not use the transition plan as the focus for developing the IEP when age-appropriate. Trainor et al. (2015) stated,

Transition planning is conceptually and empirically linked to successful postschool outcomes for adolescents with disabilities and has been legally mandated for more than two decades. Unfortunately, young adults with high-incidence disabilities, including learning disabilities (LD), emotional disabilities (ED), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), continue to experience poor postschool outcomes. (p. 113)

Section C in the IEP requires the IEP team to develop and implement transition services toward the student's post-secondary goals. Creating a student's post-secondary transition plan requires a collaborative effort from the IEP team to identify measurable goals based on formal or informal, age-appropriate transition assessments. The post-secondary goals should support and guide future courses to ensure the material corresponds with the student's interests and strengths. As the post-secondary goals embedded in the IEP, the school is responsible for ongoing reviews and reports of federal compliance (Trainor et al., 2015). Unfortunately, school staff/faculty continue to face challenges remembering implementing the transition services (Flannery & Hellemn, 2014). A frequent error for IEP teams is not connecting the student's post-secondary goals to the annual goals in the IEP, which can often be a reason for schools not implementing the appropriate transition services. According to Flannery and Hellemn (2014), "The ultimate outcome of school is success in adulthood: stable and competitive employment, independent living, and satisfaction with one's quality of life" (p. 67). To support students to meet their goals and ultimate outcomes, the IEP team must align the post-secondary goals to the other sections

of the IEP. When a student's post-secondary transition plan correlates with the annual IEP goals, disability services, and accommodations, the school will be integrating transition services on a more consistent basis.

Supporting students with disabilities in the workplace is available to accommodate a student's needs. Job coaching can be a beneficial method for supports in an employment setting. A job coach is responsible for implementing systematic instruction to individuals with disabilities that develop skills transferable to competitive employment positions in the community (Wenzel et al., 2021). Schools may use support staff or paraprofessionals as job coaches to provide opportunities to learn jobs within the building. Districts will frequently partner with the custodians, kitchen staff, and offer employees other career areas, to provide students with experiences in various fields of work. Having the school staff provide duties of a job coach is beneficial for collecting and analyzing student performance data for rate of work, accuracy, and soft skills. When schools can develop internal partnerships, it eliminates barriers and supports transition services for students with disabilities. Schools can also partner with adult service providers to visit different sites in the community and participate in volunteer work. Students in high school with disabilities can benefit from volunteering in the community and having a job coach critique and report their skills. Teachers can use the data to update the student's IEP and post-secondary goals. When high school students begin to receive vocational support from a job coach, the coach is responsible for on-the-job supports, data collection, data analysis, job retention, and other critical factors that provide knowledge for succeeding in a career.

As avenues for developing employment skills and soft skills within a real-life environment, high schools may implement a School-Based Enterprise (SBE) as a transition service. A school-based enterprise is an independent organization that originates within the classroom and delivers goods or services to meet the needs of others (Azevedo, 2019). Establishing an SBE can be a challenge if the team is not focusing on the customer's student strengths and product needs. Focusing on the student strengths helps educators avoid comparing students with disabilities to a "model" employee. If teachers/faculty align students with disabilities to employees without disabilities, the focus can turn to the students' deficient skills, which frequently are from disability versus playing to the strengths (Azevedo, 2019). A few examples of SBEs with participating students in special education are in-school sub shops, a school spirit store, car washing/detailing, and a coffee and/or snack cart. Incorporating an SBE benefits students with work experiences that earn money, comprehending the employment process, working outside the classroom, and promoting self-confidence (Azevedo, 2019).

Transition programming is continuing to grow and be more inclusive in today's society. High schools have higher expectations to provide students with disabilities transition services and opportunities. SBEs are excellent resources for supporting students with real-life work that has a direct and meaningful impact. Career and Technical Education (CTE) is another systematic approach for delivering transition services that prepare high school students for a post-secondary career. CTE is similar to SBE as a vocational school experience that focuses on real-world skills with a hands-on approach. According to Kettleman (2019):

In 2018, about 243,000 Missouri students participated in at least one career education course or program. 24,509 Missouri students with IEPs were enrolled in CTE courses, with the majority of course participation in the Business Education and the Occupational, Family Consumer Science & Human Services career clusters. (p. 7)

CTE is a transition service to support students who have post-secondary career knowledge and experiences. In 2018, Missouri supported over 24000 students receiving special education services in one platform, CTE, to promote a post-secondary life. The CTE emphasizes exploring career options, dynamic classroom instruction, and relevant fieldwork in areas of interest (Andert & Lohse, 2019). Students attending CTE typically have an alternative schedule. CTE can be a half-day or full-day career and technical training program that embeds robust vocational skill-building in specific job domains. The CTE program objectives are to improve students' post-secondary achievement, increase job placement percentages, and engage high school students to produce higher graduation rates. CTE addresses students' characteristics and skills, such as decision-making, self-assurance, goal setting, problem-solving strategies, and self-advocating (Ketterman, 2019).

CTE instructors also have a different landscape than traditional teachers. CTE educators must have two years of full-time work experience within the area they instruct, and the educational backgrounds may vary. In addition, CTE instructors have to complete an abridged and accelerated teacher certification process and are potentially required to maintain the industry-specific certification (Andert & Lohse, 2019). Career and technical schools can offer an extensive list of employment industries all while in one location. A



combination of schools within St. Louis (MO) County partner together to provide two CTE programs that include competitive entry and hybrid programs. The competitive entry programs include career education in advanced manufacturing, arts and communication, business, technology, construction, human services, medical services, animal sciences, public safety, and transportation (Andert & Lohse, 2019). The entry process for these types of transition programs can be a competitive application process. CTE programs are sought after and can develop high levels of interest. CTE programs use prerequisites and rubrics to support the admissions process. Some common factors programs review from applicants are attendance, school (and community) discipline, academics, and personal input (Andert & Lohse, 2019). The hybrid CTE programs include outdoor maintenance, construction trades, technology, manufacturing, and medical services. The hybrid option encourages diverse learning groups with accommodations, differentiated instruction focusing on student strengths, and pathways for exploring job industries in a condensed setting of embedded supports that promote meaningful learning (Andert & Lohse, 2019).

CTE is one of the most popular and active transition programs that offer all students opportunities to gain experiences in various career paths. The mission of bringing attention to well-paying, high-demand, and viable careers continues within public high schools across the country. Although there are preconceptions that students with disabilities cannot succeed in CTE programs due to hazardous course environments and program assessments, CTE proceeds to be an acceptable education placement for any student to attend. Data from 2018 reveals, 76% of students with an IEP were eligible for graduation, and 95% of students with an IEP were successful in the CTE concentrators

(Ketterman, 2019). Career and Technical Education programs are a crucial sector for the public education system. The CTE programs are a desired option for the youth in our schools as they begin to investigate and prepare themselves for the future.

Student Work-Based Internships and Career/Community-Based Instruction (CBI) are collaborative partnerships between schools and community organizations that provide transition services to students with disabilities. Student internships and CBI are typically volunteer work, but some internship programs may have the opportunity to be paid. Student internships and CBI are specific on-the-job training that replicates an employee's tasks at the partnering organization. According to Sousa et al. (2019), "Work-based internships provide real-life opportunities to gain transferable skills related to employment" (p. 2). School districts will frequently extend the classroom to the partnering business's workplace and staff teachers, job coaches, related services providers, and other relevant professionals to implement transition training for students with disabilities. When students with developmental disabilities enter their final year of high school, the goal of employment can be out of reach, requiring a robust program to support the post-secondary transition. Work-based internships for students with disabilities can develop and overcome barriers by increasing collaboration between partners, cultivating a more inclusive application process, implementing a flexible schedule, and fostering self-confidence to participate (Henke, 2020). CBI trips focus on skill-building within the community setting. CBI can be a flexible model that focuses on employability skills at a local business or applying an appropriate purchase routine when shopping at a store. Using the community to provide skill-building is critical for developing and sustaining post-secondary skills necessary for a successful transition. CBI

trips can appear during the school day like a traditional field trip, where students and staff leave for a portion of the day to engage in lessons outside of the school setting. Student work-based internships and CBI are meaningful opportunities for individuals who require additional supports working toward competitive employment.

Traditionally students with significant disabilities experience poor employment outcomes after graduation. Providing students with disabilities programs and opportunities that emphasize the development of specific abilities, the students can absorb the necessary skills to have a more successful post-secondary employment outcome (Choiseul-Praslin & McConnell, 2019). Perhaps the most common transition program schools use for students with disabilities is the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), a federal mandate. According to the Department on Disability Services (n.d.), "The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program provides vocational and rehabilitative services to individuals with disabilities to help them prepare for, secure, regain, or retain employment. Persons with disabilities face some challenges in today's modern workplace" (para 1). Individuals eligible for VR services must be 18 years old and diagnosed with at least one of three impairments, including sensory/communicative, physical, or mental impairment that negatively challenges their ability to be employed successfully (Dutta et al., 2008). Each state has a DVR with funding that allocates assistance for students with disabilities. School districts are assigned a VR counselor that meets with students eligible for VR services and supports them with various opportunities. VR offers various services that are unique to the person's needs. The VR counselor or individual can decide which services are appropriate for supporting the individual to secure competitive employment successfully. Some of the services VR

offers include guidance and counseling, job-seeking skills, job placement, and vocational training (Vocational Rehabilitation n.d.). A more recent transition opportunity for high school students with disabilities is the Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), an extension of VR. The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 provides a policy to focus on competitive employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities rather than facility-based workshops or day habilitation centers. WIOA provides federal funding to the states to implement Pre-ETS to ensure VR agencies provide transition services, supports, and resources to youth-age students with disabilities (Taylor et al., 2021). DVR is the most common form of transition services in high school because of IDEA legislation requiring post-secondary transition services. The growing Pre-ETS is also gaining attention through high schools as an additional or pre-cursor transition service for students with disabilities.

Although there are federal models for employment transition services in public high schools, it does not necessarily meet the needs of all individuals with disabilities. Project SEARCH is an international model transition program that focuses on employability skills within the community setting and relies on various partnerships. The idea for a transition program to evolve into Project SEARCH originates from Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (About us - Who We Are, 2021). Project Search has an extensive history of successfully partnering with schools, businesses, and agencies that support individuals with disabilities. Salonikas (2019) reported, "Des Moines Public Schools is partnering with Mercy One to give students in the special education program an opportunity to gain skills and enter the workforce after graduation" (para. 1). The program provides students with real-life experiences by completing internships in

multiple career fields while having classroom lessons to learn about themselves and career choices (Salonikas, 2019). Project Search's worldwide partnerships between school districts and businesses provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities for ages 18 to 22. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention (2020), 61 million adults in the United States live with a disability which accounts for the highest population for minority groups, at 26% of the country's adult population. Project Search's movement to support this minority group is consistently improving across 42 states and five countries. Project Search operates over 600 sites in 42 states and five countries, with exceptional methods for successfully integrating students with disabilities into the workplace as part of secondary education (Project SEARCH 2020). The transition program's administrators continue to replicate Project Search's unique model to expand sites to increase the number of individuals they can support. As of 2019, Project Search has provided employability skills and job training to more than 3,700 students with disabilities (Jones, 2019). Project Search's mission to partner with schools and support students with disabilities by providing opportunities to learn job-related skills is an excellent example of a successful transition program for earning employment.

Transition programs for students with developmental disabilities tend to be more available in compresence to transition opportunities for other disability categories, such as students with an Emotional Disturbance (ED). When students apply to be part of a transition program, there are frequently qualifications or specific criteria in the admission process. Students with ED may not meet the criteria for various reasons. Although this population does not meet the criteria for having an intellectual disability, there can still be prevalent factors that require additional services to address their post-secondary transition

goals. Students with ED are just as inclined to fail if the appropriate opportunities and services are not available while in high school. Wagner et al. (2016) suggested that post-secondary outcomes for individuals with ED have been described with words that imply the transitions were unsuccessful. Students with disabilities, including ED, are required to engage in transition services in the IEP. Although the disability is not physical or quickly noticeable, students with ED have significant struggles that become barriers to success in all parts of life. Regardless of the disability of a student, transition services and opportunities should determine by the IEP. If the team believes students can benefit from a transition experience while in high school, the student should allocate the services.

Wagner et al. (2016) stated,

Successful early employment experiences are critical for setting youth with disabilities on a path toward economic and social self-sufficiency and helping them become productive adults. The failure to successfully transition from high school to the working world can put them on a path of dependence, underemployment, and lack of meaningful contribution to the economic well-being of their families. In addition, employment can offer people a sense of purpose and personal meaning (e.g., fostering pride and self-esteem) and help define who they are and how they fit into the community, important intangible benefits that do not accrue to those who cannot find or keep quality jobs. (p. 133)

Unlike other disability categories where the most significant barrier may be getting a job offer, the greatest barrier for individuals with ED is sustaining employment over time. Research suggests that students with ED average less than eight months at a job before becoming unemployed, which is much less time than individuals with other disabilities

(Wagner et al. 2016). When developing the post-secondary transition plan and IEP for a student with ED, the process is consistent with the special education process. The basis for the student plan is on the formal or informal transition assessment with post-secondary goals that are in the student's interests and strengths. If the assessment or other information implies specific transition programming needs or services, the IEP team identifies and provides those services.

Preparing our youth for the future is as prevalent now as ever, and expectations continue to increase. Transition programming and planning are essential elements of the public school district and society after graduation, and local education authorities are working diligently to develop and improve the post-secondary transition planning process. As a result of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act in 2014, school districts have appropriately reacted by increasing transition services by moving on from sheltered workshops as post-secondary employment goals and increasing expectations to competitive employment. Schools incorporate more students in the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and Pre-Employment Transition Services as transition services. Schools are accessing CTE programs to enhance post-secondary success rates. Students requiring additional support increase their options for transition services, such as work-based internships, community/career instruction trips, job coaching, school-based enterprises, and even national models like Project Search. Schools and society are aligning to enforce services offer an opportunity to equip individuals with disabilities skillsets necessary for securing a successful career and post-secondary life.

**Educational Disabilities and their Impacts on Post-Secondary Transition**

Students receiving special education services have completed an evaluation process that results in an educational diagnosis for at least one of 13 qualifying disabilities. The areas of eligibility categories are autism spectrum disorder (ASD), deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance (ED), hearing impairment (HI), intellectual disability (ID), multiple disabilities (MD), orthopedic impairment (OI), other health impairment (OHI), specific learning disability (SLD), speech or language impairment (SLI), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and visual impairment (VI). Each of the disability categories impacts the student's participation in the general education setting and therefore requires specialized instruction to access a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) through their Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). As students become older and enter the high school setting, the IEP process focuses on the student's post-secondary transition and how the disability impacts the student in an academic setting. Public school districts address post-secondary transition services and align outside agencies to be part of the IEP team when a student turns 16 years old. The school adds a team member who can continue supporting the individual after high school graduation by including an outside agency. There are various degrees and ranges to how a disability can impact a student's post-secondary transition. Disabilities can cause barriers to earning and/or securing competitive employment, admission to a higher education program and living independently. Depending on the student's disability can impact the student's post-secondary transition in various ways.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: A Comparison of State Eligibility Criteria (2020) categorizes each of the disabilities into incident level domains.



The domains are Low-Incidence Disabilities, Medium-Incidence Disabilities, and High-Incidence Disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act shares that Low-Incidence Disabilities consists of MD, HI, OI, VI, TBI, deafness, and deaf-blindness which make up approximately 5% of students with disabilities. ASD, ID, and ED make up the Medium-Incidence Disabilities which accounts for nearly 28% of students with disabilities. Students qualifying for special education under SLD, SLI, and OHI represent the High-Incidence Disabilities group, with approximately 67% of identified students with disabilities. Regardless of the disability incidence rate, all disabilities impact students gaining the necessary skills for transitioning into a post-secondary setting successfully.

Although students with OHI, SLD, and SLI are in the High-Incidence Disabilities group, these students are still at risk for barriers to interfere with a seamless transition into a post-secondary setting. Students who qualify for special education under OHI often have a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Logsdon (2020) explains the diagnosis process for OHI,

The IEP Committee of a school would consider a medical statement of the student's impairment. It should be permanent or expected to last for more than 60 days. The condition would be affecting the student's strength, vitality or alertness in the classroom environment, and it has an adverse effect on their educational performance. Evaluations may be done assessing educational performance and identifying the student's needs for special education. (para. 9)

The causes of OHI can vary among chronic or acute health issues. Students receiving special education services of OHI may have a medical diagnosis of ADHD. ADHD can

impact a student's learning by limiting their ability to focus, listen, and exert effort in the classroom. ADHD can also make individuals have less self-control and become restless, talkative, off task, and/or disruptive to other peers (Hasan, 2020). ADHD is not something that goes away with time. Individuals with ADHD have continuous behaviors that connect to the early developmental stages of youth and adolescence and into adulthood (Watson & Ditzell, 2021). ADHD symptoms can improve over time, but the disability can still be impactful when students are older and engaging in a post-secondary transition. A common concern for young adults with ADHD is the tendency to not fully comprehend the limitations their disability causes to them and follow appropriate procedures for disclosing information regarding the disability to others (Crawford, n.d.). Students with ADHD transitioning from high school into a post-secondary setting can look different, depending on the student. Some students may look to college, while others are seeking employment.

In most cases, students are 18 years old when graduating from high school occurs. The transition after high school graduation is significant for anyone with or without a disability. When a student is 18 years old and has ADHD makes life-changing decisions, the IEP teams must support the student throughout the process. Crawford (n.d.) isolated and explained some key areas these students struggle with when a post-secondary transition occurs,

Many either don't know/underestimate the value of their personal capabilities, interests, and aptitudes or go to the other extreme of grossly exaggerating the capacity for living on their own, enrolling in higher education, and starting a career. As a result of this lack of involvement in assuming/be given responsibility

for their future, students with ADHD struggle to effectively self-advocate as adults who can and do effectively take care of their own affairs. (para. 6)

ADHD impacts individuals differently but can commonly disrupt individuals throughout the day in all areas of life. It is essential for high schools to support students with ADHD by implementing learning strategies for time management, organization, prioritizing, and other executive function skills that can support their transition into adulthood.

In addition to ADHD, the student can also have an SLD that can adversely impact their education. Students with ADHD are more likely to have an SLD than those without ADHD. Wei et al. (2014) explains,

Studies that have examined children identified with both ADHD and LD reveal that rather than one being a result of the other, many children with comorbid ADHD and LD are actually afflicted with two distinct conditions, representing a subtype of individuals who possess both disorders. (p. 216)

Students with SLD, also known as Learning Disabilities (LD), can qualify under specific areas of math, reading, and/or writing. Drummond (2018) defined LD as,

People with learning disabilities (LD) have difficulty learning particular skills or academic areas. Learning disabilities are not related to intelligence. They are often physiological, in that the brain of someone with LD may be wired differently than other people's brains. (para. 12)

Having an LD can limit a student's confidence and participation within the classroom.

Students with LD often appear to have a mild disability that primarily affects their academic achievement, but not other areas in life. Typically, students with LD have age-

appropriate social skills, making them easy to overlook when providing post-secondary transition services. According to Dunn (2015),

A major reason for this lack of attention has been an assumption that individuals with LD have a mild disability that primarily affects academic achievement; therefore, they have the ability to move from secondary to post-secondary environments without a lot of difficulty. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many students with LD. The results of a number of recent studies have suggested that many adolescents with LD do encounter difficulties in making the transition to adult life, including problems related to unemployment, underemployment, job changes, participation in community and leisure activities, pay, dependency on parents and others, satisfaction with employment, post-secondary academics, and functional skills. (para. 4)

Students with an LD have severe struggles in the related subject field, which does not accurately represent their overall cognitive abilities. The students with LD have a relative strength in other subject areas, so disability becomes a massive barrier in life. Math, reading, and writing are essential focuses necessary to exhibit daily in a competitive post-secondary employment position and basic requirements for higher education programs.

The third disability category in the High-Incidence Disability group is Speech or Language Impairment (SLI). SLI is defined by IDEA in Sec. 300.8 (C) (11) (2017) as, "a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" (para. 1). Students with SLI can have difficulties with their communication which impacts them in various ways throughout life, including post-secondary transition. The transition into

adulthood for students with SLI is historically encouraging. Students with SLI are among the most favorable to completing a post-secondary transition from high school to a career or higher education program (Quigney, 2017 as cited in Smith et al., 2014). Although the degree to which the SLI impacts the student's ability to effectively communicate plays a critical role in the post-secondary transition, traditionally compared to other disability categories, SLI has been relatively successful (Quigney, 2017). Students with SLI should continue to engage in effective transition practices that focus on transferable skills to support their post-secondary plan.

The Medium-Incidence Disability group consists of just under 30% of all students with disabilities. The disability categories in the Medium-Incidence Disability group include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Intellectual Disabilities (ID), and Emotional Disturbances (ED). ASD can be a medical diagnosis given by a medical doctor or an educational diagnosis through the school evaluation process. Within the school setting, Sec. 300.8 (c) (1) of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2017) defines ASD as "a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" (para. 1). The medical diagnosis for ASD follows a different series of procedures than an educational diagnosis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) ASD Diagnostic Criteria explains that meeting the criteria for ASD requires consistently displaying deficiencies in social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communication behaviors used in social interactions, and developing and maintaining appropriate relationships with peers. In addition to the pre-mentioned characteristics, an individual receiving a medical diagnosis of ASD must also display two of the four types

of restricted, repetitive behaviors, including stereotyped, insistence on sameness, highly restricted, and/or hyperactivity/hypo-reactivity to sensory input (2020). When comparing the education and medical diagnosis for ASD, both evaluations are robust in determining an outcome. The educational key factor is how the disability impacts the student's participation in the regular education setting. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (2017) continues the definition of ASD by explaining, "Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences" (para. 1). Students with either a medical or educational diagnosis of ASD have a higher risk factor for barriers during the post-secondary transition. ASD frequently causes individuals to struggle with social skills, communication, and sensory input, which are critical for securing employment, attending higher education, and/or living independently. In addition to impacting a person's social skills, communication, and sensory needs, individuals with ASD can also have a challenge with the functions of their behavior. According to Taylor and Seltzer (2010), "Indices of behavioral functioning such as autism symptoms, maladaptive behaviors, functional independence, and comorbid psychiatric disorders are also likely related to the employment activities of young adults with ASD in the years following high school exit" (p. 2). ASD can impact individuals negatively in various ways that cause barriers to securing and/or sustaining employment. Another traditional behavior for an individual with ASD is navigating change and transitions successfully. When an unpredicted occurrence disrupts routines, it can cause extreme frustration for an individual with ASD. Hatfield et al. (2017) stated,

This transition out of high school can be particularly difficult for adolescents on the autism spectrum for a number of reasons. A key feature of autism is difficulty coping with uncertainty, which is linked to increased levels of anxiety. The period of transition out of secondary school can be particularly anxiety provoking for adolescents on the autism spectrum as they face the insecurity that accompanies changing life roles. (p. 2)

Transitions can be very challenging for someone with ASD, and the event from transitioning from the school system in which a person has been part of for nearly 18 years into a much more unstructured reality can be a massive hurdle for a person with ASD. Although ASD contributes several barriers that can negatively impact a person's ability to reach their potential in a post-secondary setting, implementing robust strategies and proactive planning support the outcome. When students with ASD are approaching their graduation date, transition planning with the IEP team can support the shift in roles and prepare them for a new environment (Hatfield et al., 2017). School IEP teams should focus on post-secondary transition planning rather than academic performance as a best practice approach to better equip students for a successful future beyond high school. According to Hatfield et al. (2016),

Fewer parents of adolescents with autism perceive the transition planning process as useful and have reported that they want to be more involved in the process. Currently, schools tend to focus on the academic performance of adolescents on the autism spectrum who do not have an ID, rather than engaging them in comprehensive transition planning. In addition, autism-specific challenges are often not taken into consideration. These include difficulties conceptualizing

hypothetical future events, managing anxiety, and communicating their preferences to others. Therefore, there is a need for a more tailored transition planning program for students with autism. (p. 2)

ASD is a particular disability encompassing various deficiencies that depend on the individual. School leaders must continue developing and organizing transition programs with individual flexibility to increase soft skills and lead to a seamless post-secondary transition.

Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) often engage in an alternative academic curriculum and assessments outside of the regular education setting. ID is a disability determined by an evaluation team through cognitive and adaptive assessments. Sec. 300.8 (c) (6) of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2018) defines ID as "significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" (para. 1). Individuals with ID can struggle in all essential matters for being independent. Some examples of the categories individuals have challenges with compared to individuals without ID are communication skills, social skills, basic reading, writing, and math, personal health needs, safety, independent living, and self-advocacy. Students with ID can range in the supports they require for securing a seamless post-secondary transition. Some individuals with ID will complete high school, and with the support of the IEP team, participate in transition planning to promote their transition into the workforce or achieve other post-secondary goals. Another group of students with moderate ID may not be ready for competitive employment and be more successful working in a facility-based employment center with



personal supports. A small group of individuals with ID may not be ready for competitive or facility-based employment upon graduation. Students with ID who require additional supports and training can participate in an adult day program. Adult day programs can be set up differently depending on the site. Typically the objective is to continue skill-building in employment, communication, and social skills. Although there appear to be post-secondary settings for individuals with ID, the employment opportunities continue to become more available and expanding (Quigney, 2017). School districts and IEP teams can support students' (with ID) post-secondary transition by aligning the adult service resources prior to graduation. ID impacts the speed and accuracy of how an individual learns new information and skills. The sooner the IEP team can begin transition planning, the more can be accomplished prior to graduating (Intellectual Disability, 2017). When the school team can collaborate with an adult service provider while in high school, it allows the student and family to build relationships. According to Schools can support the student's family by facilitating a transition with the partners that will be on the team after the school exits, which can relieve a majority of the student and guardians' apprehension for a transition.

The third educational disability in the Medium-Incidence group is Emotional Disturbance (ED). The definition of ED, according to Sec. 300.8 (c) (4) of the Individuals with Disabilities states,

Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance. (para. 1-2)

Of each of the educational disabilities, students with ED report the lowest level for overall life satisfaction. Contributing to this information is that students with ED have a lower post-secondary education enrollment rate than their peers (Kemper, 2020). In addition to the low post-secondary satisfaction, the dropout rate for students with ED appears to be the highest among students with a disability (Quigney, 2017). Students with ED are subject to a unique disadvantage because of the physical invisibility of which the disability presents. There is no way to see ED physically or even suspect a disability in social interactions. When professionals cannot identify how severe the ED is to an individual, it is not easy to appropriately plan for the student's post-secondary transition. Typically students with ED go through the regular school day with support to help them academically and emotionally. After graduation, most supports blemish, and the disability becomes more exposed in the real world. Students with ED have a difficult

time obtaining or sustaining employment. Schools do not always look at students with ED for transition programs because they appear to have the skills to get a job. However, the key for this group is the skills to cope and maintain employment over time. Students with ED have high needs that can be met with additional training and programming while in high school. Three effective practices for supporting this group's transition are implementing student-led IEP meetings, concentrating on career and technical education, and developing community partnerships (Langer Ellison 2019). In regards to students with ED and community partners, Langer Ellison and Davis (2019) stated,

Youth who had a college representative attend a transition planning meeting had 29 times more likely to be engaged in post-secondary education. Students who receive transition assistance from between three and six community agencies are more likely to be engaged in post-secondary employment than those who receive assistance from two or fewer community. (p. 62)

When schools can engage with community partners to support students with ED at an earlier age, the post-secondary transition becomes more successful. Similar to students with other disabilities, supporting students with ED by aligning the resources they will access in their adult life prior to graduation can be very supportive and the difference in whether a student obtains self-satisfaction or not. IEP teams that support students with ED must secure community partnerships as part of the transition plan. Students with ED are more likely to lose Social Security benefits, regress in independent living skills, sustain unemployment status, encounter unplanned parenthood, and high risk of not pursuing higher education (Langer Ellison & Davis, 2019). The incorporation of community partners and/or outside agencies drastically improves students' chances with

ED meeting their post-secondary goals. Student-led IEP meetings provide an opportunity to give the students responsibility for facilitating their plans. Student-led IEPs can increase student engagement, promote self-advocacy, and develop a transparent transition plan (Langer Ellison & Davis, 2019). Students with ED also benefit from exploring alternative options for attending high school classes such as career and technical education (CTE). CTE offers students the opportunity to explore interests, gain skills and training while attending school, establish a career path, and complete steps for entering the workforce prior to graduation (Langer Ellison & Davis, 2019). ED is a fragile disability category, and professionals should not assume students have all the skills necessary for a successful post-secondary transition without formally and/or informally assessing their skills. Schools can be proactive by requiring vocational courses, programs, and assessments that collect data to support each student's level of preparation for entering post-secondary life.

Low-Incidence Disabilities consists of MD, HI, OI, VI, TBI, deafness, and deaf-blindness which make up approximately 5% of students with disabilities. When students have a disability that impairs their vision, hearing, physical movements, cognitive processing, or a combination of disabilities causes significant challenges for accessing education and transitioning into a post-secondary setting. Sec. 300.8 (c) (7) of the Individuals with Disabilities Act defines (2018) MD as "concomitant impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness or intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments" (para. 1). Students with MD have similar challenges as students with ID for post-secondary

transition. Students who have vision, hearing, or physical limitations are subject to their hurdles of accessibility. Laws protect these individuals from discrimination, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). ADA provides individuals with disabilities the right to access. Following the office of civil rights (OCR) and ADA compliances standards, individuals with vision, hearing, and physical disabilities may have some universal supports through the law. Schools can provide these individuals with services to promote their post-secondary outcomes while in high school, for example, by assisting students in developing career awareness, completing interest inventories, and evaluating their academic skills. As part of the transition plan, schools can educate individuals about their disabilities, rights and responsibilities, knowledge of strengths and challenges, and develop a strong understanding of their accommodations (Willings, n.d.). In addition to working on academics and a post-secondary transition plan, students with VI are frequently learning the areas of orientation and mobility (O&M) to increase their skills of independently navigating the community safely (Quigney, 2017). Technology has been a significant advantage for students with visual or hearing impairments to support their school access and employment. Teachers of the visually and hearing impaired can provide specialized instruction for students to learn new technology that shortens the gaps of their post-secondary transition. Similar to the other disabilities, preparing students with vision, hearing, cognitive, and/or physical disabilities will depend on the IEP team's preparation and engagement with outside agencies. Supporting the Low-Incidence Disability group can be difficult with accessing the necessary recourses, but an earlier start to planning will allow the team to make the connections that lead to a seamless transition.

The High, Medium, and Low Incidence disability groups all have barriers that impede students' learning and engagement in a successful post-secondary setting. While each student has a disability, the impact of the disability affects each student in separate ways. The common theme for developing successful transitions for students with disabilities is starting the planning process as early as possible, implementing community and outside agencies, and involving the student in their plans. Students need to know who is on the team and what each member contributes to their long-term achievements. Transition is a process that everyone will encounter, and it is the IEP team's effort that determines whether the process is seamless or not.

### **Summary**

Special education is an important sector of the public education realm, and legal suites are continuously updating compliance requirements in the best interests of students. The awareness for individuals with disabilities is increasing in schools and the community. Organizations are consistently improving to implement appropriate accommodations and/or modifications. Students with disabilities have additional challenges that create gaps in their ability to learn and transition skills compared to those without a disability. The post-secondary transition supports and services have evolved into more inclusive opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The programs outlined in schools to provide post-secondary awareness are essential for developing precursor skills required for success after high school. Schools must continue to embrace creativity in the development of partnerships to increase the opportunities for programs that meet the needs of all students. Collaborating with community organizations to establish post-

secondary transition programs can support students, families, schools, and the community for long-term success.

## **Chapter Three: Research Method and Design**

### **Introduction**

The researcher applied a qualitative research method to accumulate data through a survey and interview format. The research focused on an individual suburban school located in the Midwest. The study's objective was to identify the strengths and barriers of the school district's special education post-secondary transition programs held within the high school setting. By comparing the survey results and interview responses, the researcher could analyze the information to support the suggestions of potential strengths and weaknesses in the post-secondary transition services for students with disabilities. Additionally, the researcher examined the interview responses of the different individuals and their job titles to reveal evidence suggesting certain staff groups have a differing understanding and knowledge for transition services and opportunities. Another critical objective of the study was to develop the survey and interview questions that would compile responses to support the researcher in identifying where the school district was missing overlooking the needs of specific students or isolate the gaps within the current transition systems to allow the researcher to make evidence-based recommendations for improvement.

### **Null Hypothesis 3:**

#### ***The Research Sites and Participants***

The researcher contacted a Midwest suburban school district to seek permission to conduct a qualitative study. The researcher specifically requested to use the district's databases for accessing staff/faculty email addresses and special education transition program information to support the researcher. The researcher completed the school



district's application and submitted it to the Director of Curriculum and Assessment in the Chief Academic Officer's office. The school district responded to the researcher with permission to conduct the study.

The qualitative evaluation of the Midwest suburban school district's special education transition programs provided transparent data that exposed resources and gaps for promoting successful post-secondary transitions. The Midwest suburban school district is one of five school districts in its geographic county. The student population for this specific school district is just under 17,000 students in grades kindergarten through 12th, with 11% having an educational disability that required special education services. The district consists of three early childhood centers, 10 elementary schools, five middle schools, three traditional high schools, and two alternative schools. The study focused on the three high schools and two alternative schools, resulting in approximately 5,500 students. The selected school district for this study has the following ethnicity within the student population; 79% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 5% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 5% Multi-racial.

The researcher prepared the research by engaging in specific qualifications for the research participants, including current or former public school staff in a Midwest suburban school district. Other research qualifications include a school staff being part of a transitioning student's IEP team: case manager, counselor, teacher, transition specialist, related service provider, department chair, or school administrator.

The researcher communicated with the school district's high school staff/faculty who have supported IEP teams of graduated and/or dropped students over the past five years. The researcher gathered the appropriate contact information from the school

district databases. The researcher emailed district staff/faculty information about the research subject, a plea for assistance, and a link to complete a survey for additional information concerning the study. The researcher used the contact information to seek more specific details about subjects or research to support transparent evidence for the study. Participants could further partake in the analysis within the survey by providing their contact information to the researcher with informed consent to be interviewed. If a participant's response included their contact information, the researcher contacted the participant to schedule an interview to gather additional information for the study.

The study identified the processes, programs, resources, limitations, experiences, and post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities in a Midwest suburban school district as a qualitative study. The researcher used non-random and purposive methods to accumulate data over each research area. The five data groups will represent the following areas related to post-secondary transition for students with disabilities: support systems, the effectiveness of current programming/opportunities, critical resources, outcomes, and barriers. The five specific research areas related to post-secondary transition for students with disabilities will provide the researcher with a minimum sample size of 30 and a maximum of 60. The minimum acceptable sample size for a correlational study is no less than 30 (Fraenkel, et al., 2012).

Additionally, collecting data in samples smaller than 30 may result in an inaccurate result of the degree of correlation. By using non-random and purposive methods to analyze the survey's responses from each specific research area, the methods support a transparent reflection of consistency with previous qualitative studies that focused on improving post-secondary employment opportunities for students in all

disability categories. According to Kemper (2020), Walsh completed a study that proved the importance of implementing transition programs for students with emotional disturbances. The online survey and interviews were delivered to the population subjects of school staff who have supported students with a transition plan in a Midwest suburban high school over the past five years. Each sought-after participant was 18 years or older and was a current or former employee of the school district. According to Murdoch et al. (2014), anonymous survey results tend to provide more accurate data when disclosing sensitive information than non-anonymous surveys. Also, the *Author Manuscript Journal in Medical Research Methodology* (2017) shares that convenience sampling is beneficial because of the low cost, proficiency, and simplicity to perform.

Interviews are a research strategy pending the information the survey provides. Incorporated in the initial survey, participants had the option of volunteering to support the study further. The researcher secured more profound knowledge and experiences from the volunteer participants by conducting interviews. Virginia Tech University provides supportive information about conducting interviews for qualitative research, "They help explain, better understand, and explore research subjects' opinions, behavior, experiences, phenomenon, etc. Interview questions are usually open-ended to collect in-depth information" (Virginia Tech University Libraries, 2018, Goals of Interview Research section). The interview process provided school staff/faculty an opportunity to share experiences and discuss the processes that resulted in critical information for the investigation. The responses from the surveys and interviews assisted the researcher in isolating where the school district's special education transition services were being implemented effectively, based upon the professionals' knowledge and experiences.

**Research Questions**

*Research Question 1:* How do public high schools in a Midwest suburban school district support post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?

*Research Question 2:* How effective are the current transition programs and opportunities for students with disabilities?

*Research Question 3:* What public high school transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district have successfully supported students with disabilities to a post-secondary program?

*Research Question 4:* What critical resources influence individuals' with disabilities sustainability to be successful after high school graduation?

*Research Question 5:* What are the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities?

*Research Question 6:* What are the most significant barriers that cause transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district to be unsuccessful?

**Survey**

The researcher obtained the targeted participants' emails through the school district's database. Once the researcher's university approved the study's prospectus, the researcher then submitted the study plan to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to acquire approval to proceed with the research. After being granted permission from the IRB, the survey was dispersed electronically.

The researcher's survey focused on the following fundamental areas for post-secondary transition services in special education – available programs and opportunities, adequate supports, limitations and barriers, community partnerships, and necessary

resources. A recruitment script asking for participation was included in the email with a link to access the survey. When completing the survey, participants were required to answer six open-ended questions, one Likert-scale question, and a question seeking their contact information to participate in a voluntary follow-up interview. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time.

To maintain participant privacy and confidentiality, the researcher stored on a password-protected electronic device the participant survey quantitative responses. The anonymous setting on *Qualtrics* was initiated, and no identifiable information was obtained. The initial email requesting staff/faculty to volunteer in the study was sent to 121 email addresses. Each of the individuals who received the email was a person whose position supported student IEP teams in the high school setting. The researcher's target number of responses was a minimum of 30 and a maximum of 60.

### **Survey Questions**

*Survey Question 1:* What does your school/district do to differentiate transition services and programming based upon the student disability category?

*Survey Question 2:* What systems can your school/district implement to improve the current transition services and programming in your school/district?

*Survey Question 3:* What do you believe are the most significant barriers to developing transition programs in your community?

*Survey Question 4:* What do transition programs do to benefit your students in their post-secondary life?

*Survey Question 5:* What disability eligibility categories does your school/district overlook when providing and implementing post-secondary transition opportunities?

*Survey Question 6:* What do you believe is the overall effectiveness of your school/district transition programs/opportunities? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Not effective 5 = Very effective)

*Survey Question 7:* Why did you answer that score for question 6?

*Survey Question 8:* Are you willing to participate in an interview to support the researcher gather additional information regarding special education transition and alternative programs? If so, please provide your email address

### **Interviews**

The researcher's survey included asking the participants if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. If the participant was willing to volunteer to be interviewed, the researcher asked them to provide their contact information in response to the survey. The researcher's interview process started by organizing the survey responses by whether they provided their contact information or elected not to be part of an interview. The survey collected 33 responses with 15 participants who provided their contact information. The researcher reviewed each of the 15 volunteers' survey responses and selected 10 to schedule interviews for collecting additional information. Next, the researcher sent emails to the 10 individuals to schedule a face-to-face interview to gather additional information from a group of professionals who have different responsibilities and experiences in the public school system. The researcher then met with the 10 volunteers over five days to conduct the interviews. Each interview lasted between a half-hour and an hour long. During each interview, the researcher recorded notes over each of the topics and questions

## **Interview Questions**

*Interview Question 1:* What is your current job title?

*Interview Question 2:* What is your role in working with students with disabilities?

*Interview Question 3:* What is your professional background in the area of special education?

*Interview Question 4:* What transition program supports are effective for successful post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?

*Interview Question 5:* What are examples of supports your school/district provides students with disabilities when preparing them for success after high school graduation?

*Interview Question 6:* What are important components of transition planning for high school students with disabilities in your school/district?"

*Interview Question 7:* Within your school/district, what barriers get in the way of students with disabilities meeting their post-secondary goals within their IEP?

*Interview Question 8:* What are the most effective supports for providing students with disabilities to meet their post-secondary goals within their IEP?

*Interview Question 9:* What are the necessary partnerships your school/district requires to effectively support post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?

*Interview Question 10:* What does each of the community partnerships do to support the school/district with post-secondary transitions?

*Interview Question 11:* When does your school/district typically begin connecting students with outside agencies to support post-secondary transition?

*Interview Question 12:* What are the limitations for your district and community partnerships for students with disabilities and their post-secondary transition?

### **Methodology**

The researcher contacted a specific Midwest suburban school district to request and obtain approval to conduct a program evaluation within the alternative learning department. The program evaluation was a qualitative research study of the district's special education transition programs. In addition, the researcher offered the school district information on the proposed research, including details for accessing the school district's student and staff databases. After confirming approval from the school district, the researcher utilized the databases to determine potential participants (school staff/faculty) with experiences in supporting students in special education with post-secondary transitions.

The researcher used three databases to cross-reference former student information by seeking staff to participate in the study. The information accumulated from the responses of the staff surveys supported the research questions. The researcher collected each potential participant's email address and communicated that the research study linked to a voluntary online survey. The survey responses were saved in a data program and only accessed by the researcher. The researcher continued ongoing investigations to evaluate program data from informative databases, an extension of the survey. The continuous analysis generates standardized data to support the researcher with additional intelligence connected to the study. The source serves possible participants with school-related records while attending the school district. These statistics may be used as



secondary data to reinforce the investigation to capture graduation rates, participation in alternative programs, behavior reports, attendance, and other significant reports.

After one month of the survey being dispersed, the survey had 11 responses. The researcher and chair met to discuss resending the survey to acquire additional responses. Following the meeting with the researcher's chairperson, the researcher sent another email to the same 121 staff/faculty. Within two weeks from the second email, the survey had met and surpassed the minimum number of responses by three. The researcher had 33 survey responses, and 18 had volunteered to participate in an interview. The survey respondents did not exceed the study's maximum responses of 60. The survey results are kept in a secured data cloud, which only the researcher would have credentials to access. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with pre-determined questions that were the same for each participant. The researcher contacted the school staff identified as individuals willing to participate in a voluntary face-to-face or phone interview, using the initial survey responses. The researcher replicated this process until the necessary number of interviews and data were secured, as needed to support the study.

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher provided each selected participant with a permission/consent document. The researcher held a signed form establishing the participants' understanding and agreement for the interview. The record of consent provided transparent information to the potential interviewee, while protecting the researcher from future fraudulent acquisitions. The researcher informed each participant that the researcher would take notes for each response to each question, while the participant was responding. All participants had the option to view the notes from the researcher for their questions upon request. The researcher also informed the interview

participants that any specific information shared could be requested not to be included as subject matter in the researcher's study.

### **Limitations**

*Limitation 1:* The process's maturation poses a threat to the validity of the pandemic, causing closures of post-secondary transition programs and limiting resources for students with disabilities.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 1:* Prolonged Involvement. The researcher being involved in the environment can reduce the chance of seeking data from sources with limited opportunities. In addition, being involved in the research, the researcher can provide reliable data to uphold valid information.

*Limitation 2:* Special education services and post-secondary transition frequently change subjects; this may influence the validity of the instrumentation, observers, or outcomes over time.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 2:* Peer Debriefing. Interviewing school administrators, special education teachers, and transition specialists will support this study's validity. Having conversations and dialogue with professionals currently in this study will be critical for its validity.

*Limitation 3:* The selection of comparison groups (students with disabilities) and maturation of post-secondary opportunities not having records of supporting each other may threaten the study's validity.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 3:* Triangulation. The information will come from study strategies, such as semi-structured interviews, expert interviews,

and archival research when researching this information. Comparing the three sources will provide confidence in selecting the data for analysis.

*Limitation 4:* The selection of comparison groups (students with various disability categories) and maturation of post-secondary opportunities not having records of supporting each other may threaten the study's validity.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 4:* Negative Case Analysis.

Analyzing the data that do not reflect the trends or patterns can provide different insights for the additional data by highlighting similarities exposed through the data source that opposes the majority.

*Limitation 5:* The selection of subjects may have varying identifications from different social-emotional backgrounds, causing potential issues for comparison groups.

*Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 5:* Triangulation. The information will come from multiple data sources across various schools. Comparing the three authorities will provide confidence in selecting the data for analysis.

## **Conclusion**

The researcher utilized a qualitative method approach for collecting professional input, as data to determine the effectiveness, gaps, and barriers for a Midwest suburban school district's special education, post-secondary transition services. Using an anonymous survey to school staff/faculty gave the researcher sincere responses about the district's gaps in supporting specific disability categories with appropriate transition services and opportunities. The researcher also incorporated detailed questions through interviews, to go beyond the survey to isolate adequate supports, significant barriers,

community partnerships, and other important information that impacts a successful post-secondary transition for students receiving special education services.

## Chapter Four: Analysis

### Overview

This chapter illustrates the summaries and themes of two qualitative data sources contributing to the study's research questions (RQ). One of the data instruments used by the researcher was a survey. The survey consisted of eight questions and was shared with 121 school district employees. The recipients of the survey all served in the public school district as teachers, counselors, therapists, or administrators in both the traditional and alternative school settings. The selected group were professionals whose positions likely led them to support an IEP team with a post-secondary transition plan. The researcher's objective was to acquire a minimum of 30 responses to the survey. The first attempt of distributing the survey collected 11 responses over 26 days. The researcher monitored the responses daily, and after 15 days of no new information, the researcher collaborated with the study's committee to strategize a method for obtaining additional responses. The researcher and Chair agreed to re-send a reminder email, as a second attempt to capture new replies. The second attempt was sent to the same group as the original email. Over the next 15 days, the survey had documented 22 new responses, to exceed the minimum limit of 30 replies by three. The survey respondents were anonymous unless they provided their contact information in survey question eight and volunteered to be interviewed by the researcher. In the 33 survey responses, 15 participants volunteered and supplied their contact information. Next, the researcher used convenience sampling to select 10 volunteers to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted face-to-face over five days. During each interview, the researcher asked the participants the same 12 questions. The first three questions were based on their professional backgrounds in

public education, while the remaining nine questions concentrated on their knowledge and experiences that related directly to the study. The researcher organized the survey and interview responses in a spreadsheet to categorize the data collection when interviews were concluded. Proceeding the data's organization, the researcher aligned each of the survey and interview questions/responses with the corresponding research question(s) to support the analysis of the study.

### **Research Questions (RQ)**

*Research Question 1:* How do public high schools in a Midwest suburban school district support post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?

The researcher used survey question one, interview question four, and interview question five to compile information that addressed RQ1. Survey question one states, "What does your school/district do to differentiate transition services and programming based upon the student disability category?" All 33 of the survey participants responded to question one. The researcher studied each response for survey question one and identified the common themes for implementing systems that support students with disabilities during the post-secondary transition into adulthood. The response data suggests that the school district has incorporated state-funded resources, transition-focused classroom and curriculum, high school transition programs with community partners, student performance data, and the investment of human resources specializing in post-secondary transition for adults with disabilities.

The Midwest suburban school district allocates five full-time employees that focus entirely on supporting the district's special education post-secondary transition services. The supporting employees represent the district as a District Transition

Specialist (DTS), Special Education Transition Teacher, and three Paraeducators. The team is supported and led by two district administrators, the Director of Alternative Learning, and a Special Education Program Coordinator. The Special Education Transition Teacher position leads a transition program that fully immerses students in a post-secondary setting. The teacher aligns with two Paraeducators to implement a program that focuses on transferable skills in education, employment, and independent living. The DTS collaborates with high school special education staff to develop transition services for students receiving special education services. The school district provides special education staff with specific employees dedicated to understanding and supporting the post-secondary transition process for individualized education plan (IEP) teams. The DTS also implements transition compliance training and professional development opportunities in various outlets. Another critical role for the DTS is being the district's liaison for county-wide transition organizations, community partners, state resources, and neighboring school districts. The incorporation to assign staff specializing in post-secondary transition knowledge is a shared response from the survey participants. The reactions also have repeated comments regarding the DTS's ability to collaborate with the state-funded resources to provide students with transition services.

The state supports school districts with post-secondary transition services that include the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), Rehabilitation Services for the Blind (RSB), Department of Mental Health (DMH), and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). The survey results from question one report that the school district implements each organization when addressing transition services for students with disabilities. The school district utilizes DVR's Cooperative Work Experience Program

(COOP), which offers work experiences for students with disabilities. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Offices of Special Education and Adult Learning (2015) describes COOP as a competitive integrated work program that provides students with disabilities the opportunity to earn high school credit through employment. The work program aligns with the state's education standards, the individual's work interests, and operational needs within the local job market. In addition to COOP, it is also noted in the survey data that the school district partners with DVR to coordinate post-secondary employment opportunities, assessments, and funding to students in the last year before graduation. Pre-ETS is another state-funded transition service that the school district accesses for high school students with disabilities. Pre-ETS is a transition service that can be implemented to students before DVR supports begin at 17 years old. Students eligible for Pre-ETS can work with an employee advisor to promote their independence and employment awareness through various practices. If students with significant disabilities are limited beyond the capability to be competitively employed, it is reported that the school district connects the student and guardian with DMH to secure resources for an appropriate post-secondary setting. The response data recognizes the district's efforts in implementing state-funded resources for post-secondary transition plans.

Survey response data repeatedly acknowledged the post-secondary focuses within the courses, curriculums, and job shadowing/volunteer work experiences at the district's high schools. Participants responded that course options offer curricula to promote post-secondary life skills, such as Personal Finance, Transition Skills, College 101, and various elective courses. Also, in the school setting, the high school staff has developed



internal partnerships within the different departments, such as; custodians, maintenance, secretarial, athletics department, and kitchen staff to create opportunities for students with disabilities to job shadow and/or participate in daily volunteer experiences. Similar to in-school transition experiences, the responses note the district's community/career-based instruction (CBI) opportunities. CBI is a method for students to access the community and volunteer at local businesses or participate in transferable transition skills in the community setting.

High response to survey question one revolved around the district's transition programs and community partnerships. Many of the responses reported that the district provides student internship programs to focus on employment skills. The internship program is a partnership between the school district, two neighboring school districts, a post-secondary adult day provider, a disability resource board, and three local businesses. The collaboration provides students with disabilities multiple options for learning various career industries. Participants referenced another transition program: the district's access to the county-wide Career and Technical Education (CTE) center. Students with mild/moderate disabilities can apply to attend nine different career industries and 18 specific career programs at the CTE during their junior and/or senior year of high school. Another response to highlight is the district's partnerships with the area's adult day program providers. Adult day programs are developed for individuals with significant disabilities who are not ready for competitive employment after graduation. Adult day programs can specialize in different areas depending on the clientele disability needs. The response data informs the researcher that the district partners with adult day programs when the student has completed the required graduation coursework. The district and

adult day programs partnership allows students to attend the adult day program while still a student in the district. The partnerships provide the school team to collaborate with the adult day program to focus on a seamless post-secondary transition.

The survey response data supports the district's transition data collection tools. Students with post-secondary transition plans have data collected on the progress in selected areas in each transition program and classroom. The internship programs are equipped with task analysis data that measures various soft and hard skills directly related to the task. During CBI, it is reported that staff uses a scoring rubric to complete linear scale data tools to measure essential skills in the community setting. The student performance data provides the instructor with meaningful information on student strengths and gaps for post-secondary transition skills. The common themes in the response data from survey question one provide the researcher with professional experiences that address RQ1.

The researcher identified interview questions numbers four and five as response data to provide information that addresses RQ1. Interview question four states, "What transition programs support are effective for successful post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?" During the interviews, the respondents provided similar answers that indicated support of DVR, CTE, student internship programs, community partnerships, collaborating with the district transition team, and developing new opportunities for students. Interview question five states, "What are examples of supports your school/district provides students with disabilities when preparing them for success after high school graduation?" The responses from the interviewees aligned with survey question one and interview question four. The response data from survey question one,

interview question four, and interview question five provided the researcher with detailed information on what transition services the Midwest suburban school district offers to students with disabilities to support a seamless post-secondary transition to adulthood. The key components that the district provides to students with disabilities for transition services include CTE, DVR, Pre-ETS, CBI, student internships, transition-focused classes, and professionally developed staff to lead the case management.

*Research Question 2:* How effective are the current transition programs and opportunities for students with disabilities?

The researcher used survey question six, survey question seven, interview question four, interview question five, and interview question eight to collect information to support RQ2. Survey question six is a linear question that states, "What do you believe is the overall effectiveness of your school/district transition programs/opportunities? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Not effective 5 = Very effective)?" All 33 survey participants answered the survey question six. The response score varied from a low of three, a high of five, and an average score of 3.87. Seven participants scored the effectiveness of the district's transition services at a three, which represents the lowest score within the responses. Three survey respondents scored the effectiveness of the district's transition services at the highest possible score of five. The mode resulted in 13 respondents providing a rating of four. The 10 remaining responses were split between 3.5 and 4.5 (five responses each).

The researcher used survey question seven as a follow-up from question six. Survey question seven states, "Why did you answer that score for question 6?" The researcher reviewed each response score and identified reoccurring themes related to the

scores provided. The respondents who selected a rating of three explained the reasoning for the slightly below overall average score. These survey participants rated the effectiveness of the school/district transition opportunities with a three for various reasons. The underlying themes included the lack of space available, IEP teams scrambling during senior year, and insufficient opportunities for specific learning disabilities (SLD) and other impairments (OHI). Also, multiple responses referencing the school/district are missing a large group of students.

Survey question six generated five responses for a rating of 3.5. The justification in survey question seven for the score of 3.5 varied. An insightful answer to survey question seven discusses that too many students stay in high school until 21 years of age, with no meaningful alterations to their educational programming during the last few semesters of education. The same response suggests that too many students are pushed into college/university rather than an alternative vocation route. Another participant shares that the district has effective transition services for a specific group of students, but there are still groups the district is overlooking. Other participants that provided the same score shared that the district can do more than the current practices, improve the number of students impacted, and focus on student engagement with vocational training when post-secondary education opportunities may not be appropriate. The most frequently provided score that addresses the effectiveness of the transition programs/opportunities was four. The follow-up question generated responses to defend a rating of four. The responses reference the district's assortment of programs, a variety of transition services in comparison to bordering school districts, parents/guardians are primarily satisfied with services, and the district is resourceful in concocting further

possibilities. One reply suggested that the district has assembled substantial growth in transition services over the past decade and provides unique learning opportunities. The district has enhanced transition services by partnering with several entities to expand significantly. Students can resume profiting from the services if the programs' consistency improve and opportunities to fulfill the transition skill gaps in additional special education eligibility categories.

Five of the study's participants rated survey question six with a 4.5. In survey question seven, the respondents upheld their determinations for several motives, with one notion as a reoccurring theme. Three of the five follow-up explanations alluded to the district having a knowledgeable administration team that effectively supports the schools' students, families, teachers, partnerships, and programs to proactively arrange for each student to engage in a seamless post-secondary transition. Three of the 33 survey participants rated survey question six with the maximum score of five, signifying that the school/district's active transition services are particularly efficacious. Survey question seven provides a consensus for a maximum rating due to the diverse possibilities, ingenuity, and a medley of the external resources supplied to pupils daily in preparation for their post-secondary future. A response correspondingly acknowledges the district's proficiency and readiness to individualize programs for students that promote the post-secondary transition plan. Another explanation conveys that the district pursues unexplored possibilities to benefit students' progression of skills and bolster post-secondary transition services. The response also commends the district's willingness to expand collaborations, upholding the limitless measures for growing student opportunities exceeding comparable school districts within the same geographic county.

The researcher selected the response data from survey question six, survey question seven, and interview questions four, five, and eight to address RQ2. The researcher determined the summarized information conveyed for RQ1 regarding interview questions four and five correspondingly represent factual components that explain the effectiveness of the school/district's transition services that RQ2 references. The results of interview question four report that the district engages in various effective transition services to endow students with transferable resources after high school graduation. The replies from interview question five provide examples of successful transition services experiences. During the study's interviews, the researcher gathered that the effective transition services included CBI, CTE, DVR, Summer Teen Employment Programs (STEP), student internship programs, adult day program partnerships, outside resource agencies, and essential skills courses.

Interview question eight states, "What are the most effective supports for providing students with disabilities to meet their post-secondary goals within their IEP?" The researcher selected the response data and information from interview question eight to support findings that attend to RQ2. The comments from the individuals during the interviews provided the researcher with information that discussed the adequate support that the district implements to support students with disabilities in meeting their post-secondary transition goals. Most of the responses align with the previous responses in interview questions four and five, sharing many of the same programs, services, agencies, and opportunities. Interview question eight also generated new responses that the most effective support for students with disabilities is to individualize the transition services with realistic expectations. Supportive transition services should understand the students'

needs and connect them with the appropriate resources for long-term success, such as DVR or DMH. A typical response for interview question eight centered on the idea of implementing the post-secondary transition plan earlier to increase its effectiveness. Various interviewees proposed that starting the post-secondary transition conversations among the IEP team sooner can supply the student with further opportunities, resources, and services to address the post-secondary transition goals.

The researcher accumulated meaningful information through survey question six, survey question seven, and interview questions four, five, and eight. Survey question six equips the researcher with concrete ratings for district transition services. The average rating of 3.87 indicates that participants observe the current services to be effective for students. In several survey and interview reports, a common phrase was "there is always room for improvement." The statement implies that some participants would not select the highest rating because it may present adequate services without further improvement. The compiled response data supplies the study with common themes, subjective perceptions, and robust evidence to assist the researcher with recommendations for improving current and forthcoming post-secondary transition services.

*Research Question 3:* What public high school transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district have successfully supported students with disabilities to a post-secondary program?

The researcher selected the responses of survey question four and interview questions four, five, and eleven to address RQ3. Survey question four states, "What do transition programs do to benefit your students in their post-secondary life?" The survey question received 33 unprompted short-answer responses. The researcher linked survey

question four response data RQ3 to connect what transition programs have been successful through the survey disclosing what the actions for each transition program are for successfully supporting students with disabilities. The response data shares several themes in the information provided to the researcher. The survey revealed that the district's efforts for providing transition programs, external resources, and post-secondary skill-building classes are all effective practices for promoting a successful post-secondary transition.

The participants' responses share that the district implements transition programs such as CTE, Pre-ETS, CBI, COOP, Missouri Job Center, student internships, job shadowing, and partnering adult day programs to promote successful post-secondary transitions. The transition programs supply students with a real-life experience directly tied to post-secondary employment and/or education. The district's special education transition programs allow students and parents to figure out where students can be the most independent then use the information to seek those opportunities to engage in a fulfilled, productive, and empowered post-secondary life. The student internship programs provide task analysis data tracking that measures each student's hard and soft skills while performing tasks at the internship. The data collection is imperative to the student and team because it identifies the strengths and gaps that the student displays outside of the classroom and in a complete employment setting. The data can be used to close gaps in challenging areas for each student and better their skills to be competitively employed and/or as independent as possible.

A significant factor in implementing a successful and seamless post-secondary transition is making early connections with agencies to provide early and long-term



services to students with disabilities. Additionally, the district introduces students and families to external resources, such as DVR, RSB, and DMH. These agencies can assist students with disabilities and their families during high school and beyond graduation. The schools provide training for updated compliance practices to ensure the students are being introduced to outside agencies when appropriate. One response shares that the district supports students by offering a community resource fair where families can make necessary connections to local organizations that can impact their student's post-secondary life. The survey results report that these wrap-around services can also help with employability assessments, tuition/book assistance for college, advisement for technical programs, and job placements.

Different responses to survey question four shared that the district offers post-secondary skill-building special education classes, such as Independent Living Skills, Community Based Skills, Social Skills, Transition Skills, Studies, Personal Finance, and College 101. The classes can guide students to meeting their post-secondary goals and/or lead them to partake in a post-secondary transition program. Offering specialized transition courses teaches students new skills and improves learned skills. The survey results share that offering high school courses that focus on post-secondary life can maximize a student's day by receiving an education for lacking skills implemented in everyday life. The incorporation of knowing how to prioritize the student schedule to ensure the mastering of essential skills before moving onto traditional academics is a critical component for students to become as independent as possible.

The researcher combined the data provided in the interview questions four and five to address RQ3. Information is provided in multiple responses for both interview

questions. The district's transition programs have successfully supported students with disabilities to a post-secondary program. The responses commonly recognize that the district's access to CTE, CBI, COOP, STEP, student internship programs, and partnering adult day programs support students with disabilities transition into a post-secondary program seamlessly. The researcher retrieved information from the following data sources to answer researcher question three is interview question 11. Interview question 11 states, "When does your school/district typically begin connecting students with outside agencies to support post-secondary transition? The researcher aligned the connections of introducing students to outside agencies that promote the district's successful preparation programs for post-secondary transition. The consensus of survey question 11 is that the district begins connecting students with disabilities to external resources as soon as possible or as soon as the student is eligible to receive services. Each response references the freshman year as a start point for completing documentation to open cases for select students to have case management through DMH or local governing agency resource boards. DMH and the local governing resource boards have specific requirements for individuals with disabilities to be eligible for their services. Typically, individuals eligible for DMH services have multiple or severe cognitive and/or physical impairments. DMH and local governing disability resource boards provide funding to the district's student internship programs and offer opportunities to families outside of school supporting post-secondary transition. Not all students in special education are eligible for DMH services. Students with less impactful disabilities are connected to external agencies, such as Pre-ETS and DVR. The interview responses confirm that the district's case managers connect high school students with disabilities to DVR at different times,

depending on each case. The interview responses share that if a student with a disability holds a competitive employed position, the district begins DVR enrollment at 16 years old. If students are not employed, but interested in participating in the DVR summer work program, the district can open a DVR case during the student's junior year. Students who are not interested in the summer work program can open a DVR case during senior year. The district introduces students with disabilities to Pre-ETS before DVR as early as 14 years old. The Pre-ETS program is a state program set up as a precursor of DVR. Pre-ETS partners with school districts, students, and families to provide pre-employment transition services that prepare students before opening a DVR case. Both Pre-ETS and DVR are supporting agencies that partner with the district to promote the transition programs that provide students with disabilities opportunities to learn skills needed for their post-secondary transition.

*Research Question 4:* What critical resources influence individuals with disabilities' sustainability to be successful after high school graduation?

The researcher determined that the response data generated in survey question two and interview questions six, nine, and eleven would best represent information answering RQ4. Survey question two asks, "What systems can your school/district implement to improve the current transition services and programming in your school/district?" The researcher selected the data provided in the responses to survey question two to identify post-secondary transition practices that can improve students' success after graduation. Identifying the gaps within the district's transition programming also share what specific resources influence individuals with disabilities to sustain success in post-secondary life. Survey question two explains various resources, programs,

examples, and ideas where gaps exist that can be improved to increase success for students with disabilities after graduation. The response data points to a few common answers. The most common response is the district capturing more students with disabilities to deliver transition opportunities. The district has developed programs for students with intellectual disabilities but is missing students with less apparent disabilities. The referenced idea is that transition programs are imperative resources for high school students to access for cultivating an effective post-secondary transition. Multiple responses inform the researcher that many students with disabilities are overlooked when incorporating school-operated transition programs. The survey participants' perspective is that the district's programs are geared for individuals with severe disabilities and should be extended to any student in special education. Transition programs that focus on post-secondary skill-building are essential opportunities and resources for students to achieve post-secondary success. The survey question data also underscores a gap in the district's practices for communicating post-secondary transition before students entering high school. Several responses correlate with the idea that informing students, parents/guardians, and school staff about the resources and processes involved in the post-secondary transition will improve the outcomes. The responses imply that developing and implementing the post-secondary transition page in the students' IEP in eighth grade, versus age 15, will assure the team additional time to organize and align the necessary aids for post-secondary success.

The survey participants consistently conveyed that high school special education transition programs are essential for connecting students to critical resources that foster successful post-secondary life. The survey results also communicated that the existing

transition programs need to be improved, expanded, and increased in attendance to enrich the future for additional students. Further data and replies assembled by the researcher proposed that the district's special education leadership meet with IEP teams to discuss programs and opportunities for students to pursue that will offset disabilities and promote independence after graduation.

The researcher selected the statements provided in interview questions six, nine, and eleven. Interview questions six and eleven have been utilized to support previous research questions and deliver critical information to answer RQ4. Interview question six asks the participants to identify essential components for teams to consider when planning transition for students with disabilities. The question aligns with RQ4, seeking the critical resources for sustaining post-secondary success. The researcher's further data and replies proposed that the district's special education leadership meet with IEP teams to discuss programs and opportunities for students to pursue that will offset disabilities and promote independence after graduation. Additional components provided in the response include the district's ability to construct an effective team to support each student identified with a disability, focus on individual student strengths and interests, parent/guardian investment, and connect students to appropriate outside agencies. Interview question nine inquires participants to disclose the necessary partnerships that the district requires to support post-secondary transition for students with disabilities. The frequent message expressed in most of the responses recommends that the district has several partnerships within the community that appear to be effective for supporting students. The most common partnerships noted were DVR, DMH, Pre-ETS, RSB, CTE, local governing disability resource boards, adult day programs, external vocational

programs, and businesses within the community. The district's partnerships with outside agencies are critical for implementing transition programs that eventually direct students to resources that maintain and promote their success beyond graduation. Interview question 11 is another point of data that provides information to RQ4. The information shared in the response data tells the researcher that expediting the introduction of students with disabilities with outside agencies and resources will maximize the preparation time and assistance the team put forth in planning for a successful post-secondary transition.

RQ4 is supported by various response data collected by the researcher. The information is consistent with common themes for identifying the critical resources that influence individuals with disabilities' sustainability to be successful after high school graduation. The reoccurring responses include the school district's ability to continue and expand upon the current transition programs to increase new opportunities for more students. A second theme is the school district's ability to develop and sustain partnerships within the community to pursue new opportunities. Another critical action is introducing students to external resources as soon as possible to ignite services that will continue beyond graduation.

*Research Question 5: What are the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities?*

The researcher was challenged to identify survey and interview questions that supply specific responses to the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. However, the researcher implemented the response data for interview questions 8 through 10 to find common resources and opportunities that support students with disabilities in their post-secondary life. The most frequent resources that the

responses mentioned were DVR and DMH. Both outside agencies provide life-long supports that can be instrumental in determining the post-secondary outcome for students with disabilities.

The interview responses shared that DVR provides resources and funding to individuals with disabilities to support their competitive employment goals and/or tuition for post-secondary education. DVR enters contracts with adult support agencies to provide "Discovery & Exploration" as an assessment to determine if the individuals with disabilities are ready to be successful in the workforce independently. DVR also funds adult support agencies to provide job coaching while individuals learn their jobs. By referencing the interview conversations and responses, the researcher was able to identify that competitive employment and post-secondary education, such as junior colleges, four-year colleges, and technical colleges are all possible post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Another potential outcome for students with disabilities who are not ready for competitive employment is pursuing facility-based employment (sheltered workshop). Facility-based employment is only an option for individuals who have not met the necessary expectations for competitive employment through the office of DVR. For students with severe disabilities, limiting their overall independence level required more support and resources for a successful post-secondary transition.

The interview response data provides the researcher with information that explains how DMH provides funding for individuals to attend adult day programs as a potential post-secondary transition opportunity. The day programs focus on continuing self-independence through developing social skills, recreation experiences, and volunteer opportunities. The adult day programs concentrate on continued skill-building in a safe

and enriching environment. Although the researcher could not retrieve specific answers for RQ5, the researcher compiled responses from interview questions that identify post-secondary outcomes supported by outside agencies. The resource agencies support students with disabilities in finding and sustaining successful post-secondary outcomes. The agencies provide funding for students to pursue opportunities in competitive employment, higher education, facility-based employment, and/or adult day programs.

*Research Question 6:* What are the most significant barriers that cause transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district to be unsuccessful?

The researcher addressed RQ6 with four separate data response queries. Survey questions three and five, and interview questions seven and 12 provided the researcher with supportive information regarding obstacles within the district's transition programs. Survey question three asks participants, "What do you believe are the most significant barriers to developing transition programs in your community?" The information supplied by the participants to survey question three is crucial to the researcher, because the additional data in this study suggests that community partnerships are essential for supporting students with disabilities opportunities to partake in transition programs. The responses from the survey question three, frequently reference four restrictive barriers for creating transition programs in the community. The most repeatedly mentioned barrier is the availability of dependable public transportation. The district is located within the suburbs of a large Midwestern city and does not have the same public transportation resources as the city. The county in which the school district resides has limited public transportation for students to access after high school graduation. Transition programs in the community would eventually require students with disabilities to have adequate



transportation that would not be a financial burden on the family. The community's inability to produce practical, affordable, and accessible public transportation also diminishes the school's capability for instructing students how to use the resources to get from place to place within the community. Transportation is a significant barrier to developing post-secondary transition programs within the community.

Developing partnerships can frequently come with risks. The response data suggests that evolving community relationships into partnerships is a challenge. The barrier exists within the community partner taking the risk of liability, encountering additional work, and not knowing the outcomes. Community organizations typically want to help until additional work for their business occurs or liability risk increases. The community partners not knowing the outcomes for potential programs in their organizations leads directly to the next significant barrier for developing transition programs. The schools and district need to educate and promote the objectives for post-secondary transition programs to potential community members. A critical barrier for organizations not to be involved more with programming is their knowledge and understanding of the long-term goals. The lack of organizing and scheduling meaningful conversations with community members and organizations is a barrier to expanding post-secondary transition programs. Other notable barriers provided in the responses from survey question three were lack of staffing, finances, and appropriate participants.

The following collection of data the researcher used in addressing RQ6 is generated from survey question five. The survey question asks, "What disability eligibility categories does your school/district overlook when providing and implementing post-secondary transition opportunities?" The responses to this survey

question are essential to the study and RQ6, because it provides information on which specific disability eligibility categories the district is overlooking for providing transition services. There are 13 disability categories under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The survey question results mention five disability eligibility categories that the district is overlooking for providing transition services. The survey question generated responses from all 33 participants, but only 17 mentioned a specific eligibility category from IDEA. The disability categories noted in the response are Emotionally Disturbance (ED), Hearing Impairment (HI), Intellectual Disabilities (ID), Other Health Impairment (OHI), and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Five responses referenced ED and SLD as the leading disability groups that the district overlooks when providing transition services. Just behind the leading groups is OHI, with four responses. HI received two responses, and ID received one response. Providing post-secondary transition services is a legal responsibility of the school district to provide to students receiving special education services.

Further responses that provide insightful information to survey question five include providing transition services to students with Section 504 plans, Dyslexia, and At-Risk. Although the responses do not answer the researcher's question by providing a special education disability category, it is meaningful information for supporting students' long-term successes. The transition programs in the Midwest suburban school district have an unsuccessful experience identifying all disability categories and providing services to promote post-secondary outcomes.

The researcher collected the responses from interview questions seven and 12 to provide additional data for answering RQ6. Interview question seven asks, "Within your

school/district, what barriers get in the way of students with disabilities meeting their post-secondary goals within their IEP?" The responses to this question support RQ6 by discussing specific barriers for students with a disability meeting their post-secondary goals, which relate to unsuccessful transition programs. The 10 interview responses provide consistent information citing community connections, transportation, funding, parent/guardian involvement, earning high school credits, student motivation, COVID-19 pandemic, and processes and timelines for completing paperwork are all significant barriers that restrict students with disabilities from meeting their post-secondary transition goals. These barriers are also obstacles for transition programs to overcome. The school/district's students attending the transition programs are experiencing overlapping barriers that are negatively impacting their lives after graduation.

The final piece of data collection the researcher used for answering RQ6 is the responses from interview question 12. The question asks, "What are the limitations for your district and community partnerships for students with disabilities and their post-secondary transition?" Each of the mentioned limitations impacts the district's success in developing and/or sustaining community partners that contribute to post-secondary transition opportunities for students with disabilities. The researcher aligns the documented challenges to establishing community partnerships with barriers in the transition programs. The collective responses include the lack of processes for establishing foundational relationships, transportation, funding, COVID-19 pandemic, student motivation, human resources, and staffing.

The compiled response data for addressing and answering RQ6 is evidence provided by the participants that barriers, limitations, and gaps within the transition

programs contribute to unsuccessful experiences and/or outcomes for students with disabilities. The data is relevant and related across each of the retrieved entities. The common themes in the responses supply the researcher with meaningful and accurate data for answering RQ6. The overall consensus data for all four question responses suggest the most evident areas of concern are serving all qualifying students, public transportation, community partnerships, and providing in-depth education to all stakeholders to promote opportunities.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Four, the researcher presented findings and analysis for RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, and RQ6. The objectives for the combination of research questions were to provide the researcher with data that supplies detailed information for the district's post-secondary transition programs, services, and supports. The researcher geared each question to address different sections of post-secondary transition, such as strategies for support, the effectiveness of current opportunities, successful programs, critical resources, potential outcomes, and significant barriers that impact transition services for students with disabilities. The quantitative method study analysis generated evidence to suggest that the district implements critical components to students with disabilities for transition services.

RQ1 inquires how the district's transition services support the post-secondary transition for students with disabilities. The district initiates services from state-funded resources, such as DMH, DVR, and Pre-ETS to support students during their high school years and after high school graduation. The combination and use of the district's transition services provide various opportunities to students with disabilities to gain

skills, experiences, connections, and resources that promote their post-secondary outcomes. The complete consensus includes incorporating state-funded resources, transition-focused classroom and curriculum, high school transition programs with community partners, student performance data, and the investment of human resources specializing in post-secondary transition for adults with disabilities.

RQ2 is represented strongly by two survey questions from the researcher. Survey question six is a Likert-scale question ranging from one to five and inquires the participant to rate the effectiveness of the district's transition programs and opportunities for students with disabilities. The data from the Likert-scale shares that the school district's transition services are an average score of 3.8 on a maximum scale of five. The researcher added a follow-up question to survey question six, asking the participants reasons for providing the rating they did. Several responses suggested that the district offers exceptional transition services, but there is always room to improve. Other answers compared the district to nearby school districts and implied that services are appropriate given the resources and opportunities. A key finding is the lack of services and programs for students who may not appear to need specialized transition services based on their disability title. It is indicated that the district tended to overlook groups of students who can benefit from additional post-secondary transition preparation.

RQ3 asks for specific transition programs that have supported successful post-secondary transitions for students with disabilities. The participant responses commonly referenced the district's uses of CTE, Pre-ETS, CBI, COOP, student internships, and partnering adult day programs. The CTE program offers students a wide range of experiences for careers in the technical trades to support post-secondary transition

employment opportunities. Pre-ETS supports individuals or groups of students with basic post-secondary transition knowledge to prepare them for life after graduation. CBI supplies students with activities in the community to continue to grow their skills while volunteering in the community. COOP is a collaboration of the school and DVR that supports students with disabilities to use their employment position and earn high school credits for graduation. Each of the transition programs sponsored by the district has contributed to a successful post-secondary transition.

Schools must facilitate the relationships between students with disabilities and external resources that provide long-term assistance. RQ4 complies with a list of critical resources that sustain a successful life after graduation for students with disabilities. The response data commonly reported that DVR, DMH, Pre-ETS, RSB, CTE, local governing disability resource boards, adult day programs, external vocational programs, and businesses within the community are all necessities for success beyond the school years. The specific resource(s) depend(s) on the individual and their disability. Not every resource listed can be relevant for all individuals. The school needs to understand which agencies are appropriate for students and make the connections before graduation.

RQ5 is to identify the post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. The researcher did not ask for specific outcomes in the survey or interview questions but could use other related data to report post-secondary possibilities. Using the information provided on supporting agencies, such as DMH and DVR, the researcher revealed that both agencies support individuals with resources in a post-secondary setting. DMH provides individuals with tuition-based programs and/or personal assistance for independent living. DVR offers resources to address post-secondary education options,

vocational training, and employment services. DMH and DVR support individuals with disabilities in post-secondary outcomes of competitive employment, post-secondary education, and adult day programs.

The results for RQ6 confirm the district's most significant barriers within transition programs. The participants in both survey and interview responses share similar information that suggests transportation, funding, staffing, community partnerships, and student participation. The transportation limitations are generated from the community's inability to provide adequate public transportation to members of the county. There is also a lack of resources designated for transportation for individuals with disabilities in a post-secondary setting. Funding and staffing are similar for barriers that are not consistent but will resurface and be significant for developing opportunities. Due to the liability and lack of collaboration knowledge, community partnerships are challenging to establish with large organizations. Students participating in programs is the most crucial component, and according to the data responses, the district is overlooking some disability eligibility categories. The following chapter provides recommendations for additional investigations and suggestions for improving and expanding post-secondary transition services, opportunities, partnerships, and resources for students with disabilities.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### Introduction

Developing a seamless transition from high school to post-secondary life is a challenge. Students with disabilities frequently need additional support to meet their post-secondary goals. Often the students and their families are unsure of which programs, opportunities, and resources are available when post-secondary planning. The study's investigation suggests that the major limitations for developing a seamless post-secondary transition involve insufficient or no means for funding, transportation, family support, wrap-around services, self-advocacy skills, and realistic expectations. An essential responsibility for school districts is to provide adequate support and communication to students with disabilities and their families. The researcher's study proposed six research questions to develop an enriched understanding of the special education preparation programs and processes for post-secondary in a Midwest suburban school district. To accumulate the required data, the researcher developed and shared survey questions with 121 district staff members. The survey questions focused on retrieving information that supports the researcher's in-depth knowledge of the strengths, hindrances, aids, and services across the school district's special education transition programs. The researcher selected 10 volunteers who indicated their desire to participate in a follow-up interview on the survey. The interviews generated specific information concerning the school district's special education transition supports, programs, community partners, outcomes, and gaps for progress. The researcher connected each survey and interview response with the appropriate research question to provide evidence-based suggestions for improvements and recommendations. Using this method



allowed the researcher to identify common themes found in the review of literature, survey responses, and interview responses.

The literature review recognizes the significance of post-secondary transition planning for students with disabilities. Flannery and Hellemn (2014) stated, "The ultimate outcome of school, is success in adulthood: stable and competitive employment, independent living, and satisfaction with one's quality of life" (p. 67). Students receiving special education services struggle with an emotional, cognitive, medical, and/or physical disability that confines the probabilities of achieving the "ultimate outcome" for post-secondary life. Through the special education process, the individual education plan (IEP) supports students with disabilities with a post-secondary transition plan when a student turns 16 years old, or sooner. The post-secondary transition plan outlines responsibilities and activities assigned to the school, student, parent/guardian, and outside agencies. The performed services and activities should promote the student's post-secondary employment, education, and independent living goals. The post-secondary goals guide future course selections to ensure the class instruction corresponds with the student's post-secondary interests. The post-secondary goals are embedded in Form C of the IEP, in which the school is responsible for ongoing reviews and reports of federal compliance (Trainor et al., 2015). IEP teams can encounter a challenge when balancing the desired outcome with the present level of functioning. When IEP teams create a post-secondary transition plan, the intention for the goals is to align with the individual's strengths, interests, and most recent performance data to assure the goals are attainable.

**Discussion**

The researcher's study concentrated on six research questions developed to identify critical relationships, resources, successes, limitations, and programming opportunities connecting to a Midwest suburban school district's special education department. Exploring these implications, the researcher utilized a dissertation-team-created survey and interviews to collect information that addresses the research questions. The dissertation-team-created survey was sent to various education staff/facility representing heterogeneous school buildings, grade levels, employment positions, and professional experiences. The survey results and interview responses provided the researcher with narratives for the research questions. The research's reoccurring reports and themes materialized a foundation for implications and recommendations shared later in this chapter.

**Research Question 1**

*How do public high schools in a Midwest suburban school district support post-secondary transition for students with disabilities?*

The school district's special education department's capability for connecting students with disabilities with federal and state-funded resources is significant to sustaining a seamless post-secondary transition into adulthood. Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and the Department of Mental Health (DMH) are all state and/or federally-operated organizations that are appointed to provide long-term support to individuals with disabilities. The school district's capacity to organize student schedules that incorporate individualized meetings with these agencies is essential for establishing support that will

grow with the individual beyond high school and into adulthood. Facilitating connections between students with disabilities and external resources as early as possible is crucial for the student's long-term success. The federal and state agencies can provide students with continuous post-secondary services, including funding, case management, recreation/social activities, transportation, vocational skill-building, on-the-job training, and additional resources to promote independence.

The school district's high schools enforce a transition-focused classroom setting for students with significant disabilities. These special education classes have an emphasis on functional academics and transition skills. It can be challenging for educators to veer away from the traditional academic curriculum to modify classroom objectives for essential skill lessons and promote self-independence. The essential skills classes for students learning the transition skills provide instructional practices to learn effective communication, self-advocacy, employability skills, social skills, community awareness, and independent living practices. The school district's high schools enroll students with significant disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities (ID) or multiple disabilities (MD), in essential skills classes throughout their high school careers to maximize the time spent advancing transferable transition skills. The essential skills classes also share a desire to help others while improving their dexterities. The essential skills classes collaborate with various school departments to pursue volunteer opportunities during class time. For example, a class of students may volunteer in the school cafeteria assisting the kitchen staff, while learning components of a job in the food industry. Other partnerships the essential skills classes have successfully originated within their schools are with the athletics/activities department, executive offices,

business and marketing units, fine arts programs, custodial team, and various other entities that provide possibilities. The willingness to organize and develop internal alliances is instrumental in supplying students with disabilities with a consistent model of diverse skill-building options in an employment setting. In addition to participation in the transition classes, students are encouraged to enroll in elective courses that promote post-secondary transition, such as; Family and Consumer Science, Industrial Technology, Computer Applications, Physical Education, and different classes, delivering a meaningful experience that supports a post-secondary transition.

Students with disabilities in this suburban school district have various high school transition programs linked to community partnerships. One of the county-wide programs is operated through a neighboring school district. The tuition-based program is a career and technical education (CTE) that offers hands-on learning opportunities in various trades and career fields. Although many of the CTE's programs can be a challenge for students with disabilities, a separate program within the CTE provides students with disabilities job training within the retail setting. The applied business and retail skill-building program is an excellent opportunity for students to learn hard and soft skills in a simulated job setting. The study's school district also partners with two local school districts, an adult service provider, a local disabilities resource board, and several community businesses to produce a student internship program (SIP). The county-wide program offers students with disabilities opportunities to learn and practice numerous jobs in a competitive employment setting. Students complete the SIP during their school day and earn high school credits that apply to the graduation requirements. Each SIP site leader incorporates a task analysis data tool used to record the student performance that

measures the skills performed for each job at the various site. The data provides a step-by-step analysis of the student-intern skill development, while revealing the precise step where challenges frequently occur. The data can help students learn new strategies to overcome employment and independence barriers. Data collection is a critical measure of the SIP, but expending the data to reinforce skills is imperative for supporting and sustaining long-term success.

The collaborative partnerships invested in the governing agencies are monumental when assembling and growing employment experiences for individuals with disabilities. Not all students with disabilities are prepared for a (pre)vocational training program by senior year. Some students with profound disabilities need additional aid and supervision for safety considerations. Students with severe cognitive/intellectual impairments often need additional time to learn basic skills and may not be equipped for post-secondary employment or education after high school graduation. In these circumstances, the study's school district has partnered with 12 adult day habilitation programs in the county and bordering county designed to support adults with profound disabilities. Each program presents a unique routine for a specialized population. The school district and adult day program partnership (ADPP) prioritizes personal transition schedules that authorize high school students to attend an adult day program as part of the school day to promote a seamless transition. When a student from the school district is in attendance at an adult day program, the district may fund tuition and transportation. The partnering organization supplies staffing, services, and commits to providing the student with a roster spot upon graduation (pending funding). The school district's creativity and open-mindedness to collaborate with the adult day programs support students and parents/guardians by

streamlining the transition to a long-term post-secondary environment where the students can continue engaging with peers, developing skills, and volunteering in the community.

The school district's administration allocates employees to endow the special education post-secondary transition process. The school district designates special education employees to support IEP teams to prepare and facilitate post-secondary transition plans. The District Transition Specialist (DTS) collaborates with all high school special education teachers and case managers to provide training, feedback, resources, and any updates related to post-secondary transition. The DTS actively pursues and maintains community partnerships with provincial school districts, adult service providers, businesses, outside agencies, post-secondary education institutes, and adult day programs. The robust inventory of post-secondary supports for students with disabilities reflects the district administration's creativity and the DTS's industrious work ethic.

### **Research Question 2**

*How effective are the current transition programs and opportunities for students with disabilities?*

The researcher utilized a Likert-scale survey question in the original survey sent to 121 district employees. The linear question stated, "What do you believe is the overall effectiveness of your school/district transition programs/opportunities? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Not effective 5 = Very effective)?" The survey generated 33 responses, all of which answered the Likert-scale question. The response score varied from a low of three, a high of five, and an average score of 3.87. Seven participants scored the effectiveness of the district's transition services at a three, which represents the lowest score within the

responses. Three survey respondents scored the effectiveness of the district's transition services at the highest possible score of five. The mode resulted in 13 respondents providing a rating of 4. The 10 remaining responses were split between 3.5 and 4.5 (five responses each).

Within the survey, the researcher provided a follow-up question to the Likert-scale question that stated, "Why did you answer that score for question 6?" The researcher reviewed each response score and identified reoccurring themes related to the feedback from the ratings. The respondents who determined a rating of three explained the logic for a below overall average score. These survey participants rated the effectiveness of the school/district transition opportunities with a three for various rationales. The underlined themes included the lack of space available, IEP teams feeling unprepared, and insufficient opportunities for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and Other Health Impairments (OHI). Several other responses indicated that the school/district is missing many students when furnishing structured transition programming.

The Likert-scale survey question produced five responses with a rating of 3.5. The justification in the follow-up question for a 3.5 score had an assortment of descriptions. One response shared the belief that too many students with disabilities continuing in the public education system delay graduation with no modifications to benefit the educational schedule or transition plan. The response continues to provide the idea to allocate resources for a significant alteration of academic programming during the last school semesters. Another respondent disseminates that the district has valuable transition services for a specific group of students, but there are groups the district is

overlooking. Other participants who provided the same score conveyed that the district can do more than the existing methods, improve the number of qualifying students, and prioritize vocational training when post-secondary education opportunities are not suitable.

The most frequently provided rating addressing the school district's transition services effectiveness was a score of four. The responses reference the district's assortment of programs, a variety of transition services in comparison to adjoining school districts, parents/guardians are primarily satisfied with services, and the district is resourceful in concocting further possibilities. One reply suggested that the district has assembled substantial growth in transition services over the past decade and provides unique learning possibilities. The district has enhanced transition services by partnering with several entities to expand immensely. Students can continue profiting from the services when the consistency of the programs evolves to fill the transition skill gaps in additional special education eligibility categories.

Five of the study's participants rated survey question six with a score of 4.5. The respondents upheld the determinations for several motives in the follow-up question, with one notion as a reoccurring theme. Three of the five follow-up explanations alluded to the district's knowledgeable administration team that effectively supports the IEP teams, agendas, families, and partnerships that provide students with a seamless post-secondary transition. Three of the 33 survey participants rated the Likert-scale survey question with a maximum score of five, signifying that the district's active transition programs and services are most effective. The follow-up survey questions' responses provide a consensus for the maximum rating due to the diverse possibilities, ingenuity, and a



medley of the external resources supplied to students daily in preparation for their post-secondary future. A response correspondingly acknowledges the district's proficiency and readiness to individualize programs for students that promote the post-secondary transition plan. Another explanation conveys that the district pursues unexplored possibilities to benefit students' progression of skills and bolster post-secondary transition services. The response also commends the district's willingness to expand collaborations, upholding the limitless measures for growing student opportunities exceeding comparable school districts within the same geographic county.

The researcher can draw several conclusions from the Likert-scale survey questions that provide a transparent answer and descriptions for the effectiveness of the school district's transition programs. The overall average score of 3.87 rates above the scale's median of 2.5. The average rating may be skewed for several respondents referenced the maximum score of five was not selected because "there is always room for improvements." The lowest rating provided of the district's transition services effectiveness was the rating of a three, which was selected by seven of the 33 respondents. The other rating recorded below the average is the rating of 3.5, which was selected by five of the total respondents. The justifications for ratings below the overall average reflect a consensus that the district does not offer specialized transition programs to all disability categories. Many students who need additional transition training fail to demonstrate the post-secondary transition skills for a successful future. The district's current transition programs are currently serving four of the 12 disability categories, which include Autism, Intellectual Disabilities (ID), Other Health Impairments (OHI), and Emotional Disturbance (ED). Typically these disabilities are the most common

categories requiring transition support for post-secondary life. However, further data and information indicate that many students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Speech or Language Impairments (S/LI), Multiple Disabilities (MD), Hearing Impairments (HI), and Vision Impairments (VI) are all also at-risk for needing additional services to acquire skills that transfer to post-secondary life.

The most commonly selected rating for research question two was a score of four. After examining the survey and interview responses, the researcher can conclude that the study's school district sponsors several transition programs. The researcher can also connect the high rating with its school's various services, programs, resources, and partnerships. There is uniform transparency indicating that the school district prioritizes its commitment to installing transition services and outlets for students with disabilities. Several of the study's participants referenced that in comparison to the neighboring school districts, the study's school district had more available programs, connections, and invested resources to continue growth for added opportunities. The special education transition services emerge as a success, due to the district's cultivation of community relationships that generate student opportunities.

Over a quarter of the study's participants provided a high rating, because of the school district's ability to prioritize resources, supply administrative support, effectively initiate partnerships, remain student-focused, enforce evidence-based practices, analyze data to develop new practices, and proactively arrange for students to experience programs that foster independence. The remaining nine survey responses from the Likert-scale question selected the rating of 4.5 (six participants) or the maximum rating of five (three participants) when expressing the effectiveness of the district's transition services.

These nine responses account for 27% of the participants suggesting that the school district offers premium transition services that effectively benefit students with disabilities.

The school district also demonstrates the ability to proactively revise procedures and approaches to ensure students receive adequate services. Over the past decade, the school district's ideology has evolved with adaptations in federal statutes. For example, the study's school district and numerous surrounding school districts partnered with nearby sheltered workshops to deliver post-secondary employment ventures for students with disabilities. During trials, the sheltered workshops produced an informal performance evaluation for students. In this study's literature review, the researcher outlines the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA limited facility-based (sheltered) workshops prevent high schools from placing students with disabilities in a sub-minimum wage employer (WIOA, 2014). The limitation of using sheltered workshops as a resource and post-secondary goal for high school students with disabilities is to promote inclusive opportunities. WIOA impacted the school district's ability to provide a specific experience in a post-secondary employment setting, which also supplied critical feedback from external sources that suggest scopes for skill-building. When WIOA transpired, the study's school district modified its methods and reinvigorated internal options for learning simulated manufacturing employment skills accompanied by student performance assessment systems. The stakeholders' student-focused mentality is the comprehensive explanation for the school district's success in nourishing unique opportunities.

**Research Question 3**

*What public high school transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district have successfully supported students with disabilities to a post-secondary program?*

The researcher's survey and interview responses disclose the specific transition programs that have successfully supported students with disabilities meet their post-secondary goals. The survey response data alludes to various transition programs, resources, services, and partnerships. The data responses specifically mentioned CTE, SIP, Career-Based Instruction (CBI), Cooperative Work Experience Program (COOP), and Adult Day Program Partnerships (ADPP). Each transition program supplies students in special education with a differing level of support that effectively teaches transferable skills, routines, and expectations for post-secondary life.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) is one of the most well-known programs supplying students with direct instruction in post-secondary employment. CTE is also commonly referred to as a tech school for learning technical skills in a specific career industry. The researcher anticipated that CTE would be a typical response from the study's participants. CTE is an original post-secondary program and is a staple in the county's school districts. By offering a specific career curriculum in 18 employment industries, CTE is an excellent option for students to pursue post-secondary career exploration. The CTE offers students a wide range of experiences for careers in the technical trades to support post-secondary transition employment opportunities. The researcher believes an immense challenge for CTE is the difficulty of attaining the requirements to participate in most programs. Students with disabilities frequently have

subaverage reading, writing, math, communication, and other essential skill sets that impact their ability to pass a qualifying exam during the admission process. The CTE does offer an exclusive program for students with disabilities that prepares students with vocational training and internship experiences in the applied retail and business industry. The school district's partnership with the county CTE is a significant opportunity and resource for students with disabilities to utilize. The CTE offers robust training experiences that cannot be replicated in a traditional school setting.

Student Internship Programs (SIP) focus on building and sustaining critical vocational skills within a competitive employment environment. The internship programs consist of a collaborative partnership between school districts, post-secondary adult service agencies, county resource supports, and community businesses. SIP is designed to eliminate barriers for school districts to offer students with disabilities real-life employment experiences with the support of a special education teacher, job coach, and/or employment advisor. SIP is an opportunity for junior and senior students to prepare for competitive employment upon high school graduation. The SIP offers internships in various job industries, including custodial, data processing, food and drink services, hospitality, housekeeping, maintenance, manufacturing, marketing and sales, production, and retail. The school districts and post-secondary service agencies provide employees with on-the-job training and record student performance for task-related and soft skills. Additionally, each partnering business offers natural support within the job setting and allocates an employee to act as the program supervisor. Students participating in SIP typically spend a semester at each site, which provides the opportunity to experience several job industries before graduating from high school. The IEP teams can

analyze the performance data and cross-reference the information to determine where students may be most successful in seeking employment. The data is also used to identify gaps and implement strategies to improve skills in the suggested areas. The school district's implementation of SIP is a critical program for accommodating students with disabilities vocational training outside of the traditional school environment and within a competitive employment setting.

Cooperative Work Experience Program (COOP) is a school-to-work program sponsored by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). DVR collaborates with the DTS to identify students with disabilities that are competitively employed. COOP permits students in special education to attend high school on a shortened day, with the understanding that the student is required to work a minimum of 10 hours per week at a competitive employment position. When students fulfill the required number of work hours per semester, the school district provides high school credits that apply to their graduation requirement. COOP is an effective transition program, because it promotes responsibility, organization, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. When students participate in COOP, it is likely students sustain employment in one place for a longer duration. COOP has supported numerous students with disabilities to graduate from high school and continue competitive work successfully.

Career-Based Instruction (CBI) is organized community outings attended by special education classes focusing on developing essential and/or social skills. CBI trips typically consist of a 1:3 staff-to-student ratio with groups of three-to-nine students at the high school grade level. CBI groups leave the school campus weekly or bi-weekly for five hours to participate in volunteer and social experiences at organizations in the

community. The CBI groups engage in volunteer experiences that replicate competitive employment. CBI often starts in the first year of high school, when students with disabilities begin learning about careers in their community and are provided the opportunities to volunteer at various sites in the community. While students are fulfilling volunteer tasks, the school staff collects data to reflect the student task performance in the community. The domains for which data is recorded include the students' attitude, dependability for task completion and accuracy, communication skills, maturity and motivation, and self-hygiene care. To decrease objectivity when reporting data, the school district uses a linear scoring system with a descriptive scoring rubric to identify the accurate and consistent data for each assessed domain. Starting CBI for students at the age of 14 is imperative for developing a baseline for where self-independent skills exist outside of the school routines. Special educators can also benefit from the data analysis to develop lessons that address the gaps and lacking skills. CBI is a transition program that has effectively prepared young teenagers to participate in SIP, CTE, or other programs to support their post-secondary goals.

Throughout the study, the most unique and innovative transition program supported by the school district is the Adult Day Program Partnerships (ADPP). The researcher reviewed the transition programs and services the neighboring school districts implement with their respected practices. Most nearby comparable districts provided similar transition services and programs like CTE, SIP, COOP, and CBI. The researcher could not identify another local education agency that supports students with opportunities, such as an ADPP. The researcher learned that the IEP team determines the development of an ADPP. The team will base the decision for changing to educational

placement if the change promotes a seamless transition into a post-secondary setting.

ADPP are individual programs for students who are not competitively employable and on the verge of high school graduation. When the IEP team determines it is adequate for a student to participate in an ADPP to end their public education career, the team discusses the appropriate and available options. After the team agrees on a suitable day program, the district constructs a transition plan that starts with student visits. If the student visits are successful and both the district and adult day programs agree to serve the student, the district and partnering agency complete a contractual agreement. The significant outline within the agreement is that the school district will fund the tuition and transportation until the graduation date. The adult day program agrees to provide support in the IEP and pledges to allow the student to continue attending after graduation, assuming private or waiver funding is in place. Many stakeholders' communication, planning, and organizations allow ADPP to occur. When attending an ADPP, severe impairments can impact participants' abilities to be independent, and families face challenges in producing the resources needed. The school district's preparation to produce an individualized transition plan through community partners that provide long-term care and support a slower transition for families to have reassurance in the process. The ADPP is a creative and productive opportunity for the school district to help facilitate a seamless post-secondary transition that reduces fears from students and their families, while supporting community organizations.

#### **Research Question 4**

*What critical resources influence individuals with disabilities sustainability to be successful after high school graduation?*



The researcher accumulated informative data from the survey responses and interview conversations. The information provides the researcher with common narratives for identifying the critical resources imperative to individuals with disabilities for sustaining post-secondary success. Several of the researcher's survey and interview questions alluded to similar programs, resources, and services. Many of the responses discussed the school district's resources during high school tenure. These resources include the specialized staff supporting transition services and programs (CTE, CBI, SIP, COOP, ADPP). The most common answers referenced state and federal resources, such as DVR, Pre-ETS, DMH, and local disability resource boards.

The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) is a government-supported program providing individuals with disabilities with specialized resources. DVR helps individuals with disabilities move beyond barriers associated with securing, maintaining, and/or advancing within employment opportunities. DVR offers counselors across the state that work with individuals to determine their eligibility status. The requirements for receiving services from DVR include diagnoses of a physical and/or mental impairment that impede the individual's ability to fulfill work-related responsibilities in a place of employment. If eligible, DVR can support an individual with vocational exploration, counseling, assistance finding employment, vocational training, employment certificates, and additional vocational readiness supports. DVR is an invaluable resource to the school district because most students receiving special education services are eligible for DVR services while in high school. The school district's priority for having high school students with disabilities open a DVR case is an assertive action plan for students to set up long-term supports that carry on into their post-secondary lives. Students eligible for

DVR often have a disability impacting their post-secondary potential. The school district focuses on connecting students with disabilities with DVR as early as possible to initiate services and maximize the support for meeting the post-secondary employment goals.

Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) is a federal program governed by each state. Pre-ETS offers pre-vocational transition services to potentially eligible students for DVR services in public schools. The objective of Pre-ETS is to provide students with disabilities at an earlier age with transition services, preparing them for future services and/or an enriching post-secondary outcome. The study's school district received Pre-ETS through a state university as an outreach program. The Pre-ETS program provides the school district with a Pre-ETS Specialist that coordinates student activities and plans with the DTS. The Pre-ETS Specialist supports each district's high schools in various methods. An advantage to the Pre-ETS program is the vision and action plan for supporting each high school based on the needs of that specific school. The Pre-ETS Specialist can access each school and identify the areas for which services will be most beneficial to students. Pre-ETS is also a vital resource for assisting the school district with introductions to community partners. Although Pre-ETS is a practical resource until the age of 21, it is often the initial step for identifying and securing transition resources that lead to post-secondary success.

The Department of Mental Health (DMH) provides support and resources to various individuals with disabilities. The school district frequently incorporates DMH services for individuals with developmental disabilities. DMH offers extensive support that focuses on assuring the health, safety, community participation, and meaningful employment opportunities. Students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities

can require a high level of support to meet their educational goals and needs. The study's school district provides exceptional support and resources that meet the needs of students with profound disabilities. When students with a high level of care graduate, families are often left responsible for providing the support, which is a heavy burden. DMH can provide funding and other resources to lessen the burden on families and supply individuals with the resources that will promote their health, safety, community participation, and vocational experiences. DMH provides access to imperative supports and services to individuals with disabilities that grow with the individual. For many families, DMH services are mandatory for the wellness of their loved ones.

### **Research Question 5**

*What are the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities?*

The researcher implemented the survey and interview response data associated with common resources that support students with disabilities in their post-secondary life. The most frequent resources that the responses mentioned were DVR and DMH. Both outside agencies provide life-long supports that can be instrumental in determining the post-secondary outcome for students with disabilities. The researcher pursued further information from DVR and DMH to identify concrete answers to the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities within the realms of employment, education, and independent living.

In high school, students receiving special education services have a post-secondary transition plan documented in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as Form C. The post-secondary transition plan centralizes around employment, education, and, if necessary independent living. All students 16 years or older receiving special education

services implement the employment and education domains into Form C. For students with profound cognitive disabilities, the independent living section is added for additional post-secondary planning purposes. Each section requires a goal that is specific, attainable and student-focused. The goals are developed to prepare the student for a productive and enriching post-secondary life. The student, school, parents/guardians, and outside agency are responsible for supplying services or action steps supporting each post-secondary goal. When a student transitions from middle to high school, the post-secondary transition becomes the focus when developing the IEP.

The initial post-secondary transition planning is an excellent occasion for the IEP team to develop the framework and identify the critical components supporting the student's long-term life goals. A post-secondary transition is seamless when the IEP team works collaboratively to acquire and incorporate the students' interests, parent/guardian expectations, staff/facility perceptions, and available resources. When developing the post-secondary plan, the IEP team consults closely with the DTS and/or a special education administrator (SEA) to learn what post-secondary options are available for each individual. The DTS and/or SEA are expected to connect teams to post-secondary platforms that correspond to the individual's post-secondary goals. The DTS and/or SEA is an important resource for IEP teams to learn about the potential post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

When students with disabilities graduate from high school, the options for post-secondary education can range from continuing social engagement experiences at an adult day program (ADP) to attending a four-year college. The pursuit of resuming an education often depends on the severity of the disability, motivation, and available

resources. Individuals with profound disabilities may join an ADP focusing on rudimentary living skills, effective communication, recreation/leisure experiences, and other self-enriching activities. The challenge for families is the tuition associated with the programs. The annual financial investment for ADP nearly mirrors the average yearly cost of attending a traditional four-year college. It is imperative for families with individuals attending ADP sites to be connected with DMH or other funding agencies to provide resources. DMH supports the waiver funding process, which can fully cover ADP tuition and elevate financial limitations for families. Numerous ADP organizations share common visions, but there are no two ADP sites that are identical. ADP specializes in disability areas such as challenging behaviors, severe physical and cognitive disabilities, and inclusionary. When the separate organizations offer different programs, it creates a place for more individuals to be part of and develop positive social relationships.

Job or vocational training programs are educational opportunities outside the traditional college route. Typically, individuals participating in these training programs are continuing skill-building in areas that support their desire to be competitively employed or advance their current employment. The job and vocational training programs are outcomes for individuals with a disability impeding the ability to learn and/or sustain specialized skills for employment. On-the-job training and vocational programs are options for individuals with disabilities to continue post-secondary education. On-the-job training is received through adult service providers by a job coach. A job coach supports individuals on and off the job in preparation for securing and/or maintaining employment. Job coaching aims to provide the individual with the necessary

skills, support, and strategies for learning or preparing for a job. An important responsibility for a job coach is effectively fading the support at a personalized pace that promotes the individual to work independently with ongoing success.

A post-secondary option that adults with disabilities pursue after high school is programs designed to develop specialized skills for learning a specific employment industry. Individuals with disabilities interested in specialized careers, such as carpentry, masonry, automotive, culinary, or technology can continue their post-secondary education through a vocational training program to pursue a competitive career. Vocational training programs focus on practical subject content versus concept applications. These training programs can appear in several formats, including job simulations, internships, apprenticeships, and other employment programmatic experiences structured to develop specific industry capacities. Similar to college, vocational training programs require a tuition fee. In many cases, resources such as DVR assist financial barriers.

Post-secondary education opportunities for individuals with disabilities can also include traditional two or four-year colleges, technical colleges, and military service. Individuals with disabilities statistically have a more difficult time enrolling and continuing a post-secondary education at a higher education institute. Shifting from high school to college can be a difficult transition for a student receiving special education services, because the IEP does not transition with the student. A challenge for students receiving special education services transitioning into college is achieving academic success without the support of an IEP. Although the information can be shared with the college's disability office, it is not implemented as it had been in the public school sector.

An individual with a disability can seek a section 504 plan through the college to provide appropriate modifications or accommodations to access an education. A 504 plan can be beneficial to students in college but does not offer specialized instruction, related services, and/or other supports that may have been implemented during high school.

The post-secondary employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities consist of volunteering, sheltered workshops, and competitive employment. The least restrictive and ultimate goal is securing competitive employment and working independently. When a person can independently perform work on a part-time or full-time basis and be compensated at or above minimum wage for completing their work, the individual is competitively employable. Unfortunately, not everyone has the skills or is immediately ready to work competitively or be independent when the post-secondary transition occurs. A disability can be the primary barrier preventing a person from being competitively employed in many cases. When an individual with a disability is deemed not ready for competitive employment by an adult service provider, the opportunity to earn employment at a sheltered workshop becomes a possibility. Individuals who work at sheltered workshops have disabilities that restrict the ability to work competitively and independently. Sheltered workshops offer individuals an alternative workplace with support to achieve the goal of being paid to work. Compensation at a sheltered workshop is frequently determined by the individual performance productions and can result in sub-minimum wage. Individuals working at a sheltered workshop can continue growing and improving insufficient skills. If individuals desire to pursue competitive employment after working in a sheltered workshop, they can contact DVR to support the process. Individuals who face challenges of profound disabilities may not present the skills or

confidence to work in a sheltered workshop. In these situations, individuals may attend an ADP to acquire volunteer opportunities within the community. ADP supports individuals by continuing to build vocational skills through volunteer experiences in the community. Volunteering is an excellent strategy to provide individuals with exposure, skills, and self-rewarding work. When students transition into post-secondary employment, it is important to continue to have goals and seek advancements within the employment fields. All individuals need to understand that the first post-secondary employment outcome is not the last. Regardless of the initial outcome, all individuals can continue learning, growing, and engaging in new experiences to pursue different opportunities.

Living independently after high school graduation is a significant task for most individuals, but when facing a disability, it increases the difficulty. During the post-secondary transition plan development, the independent living section is incorporated when the historical data suggests that higher care is required for health and/or safety. The independent living outcomes for most students with profound disabilities are to continue living with their families and improve skills that lead to further independence. Other possibilities can include supported living services and assisted living environments. Adult service agencies supply supported living services. The agencies designate trained staff to assist individuals to live independently or with a roommate. Each person and their needs determine the level of support. Agencies may provide support to accommodate transportation, shopping, cooking, cleaning, money management, recreation activities, and a healthy lifestyle. Assisted living environments for adults with disabilities are communities with multiple residencies for adults requiring support with daily tasks, such



as cooking, bathing, dressing, and other necessities. Individuals typically live in an apartment independently or with a roommate. Assisted living environments prioritize the residents' needs separately to ensure the appropriate services are in place.

### **Research Question 6**

*What are the most significant barriers that cause transition programs in a Midwest suburban school district to be unsuccessful?*

The researcher's survey and interview responses disclosed the specific barriers that caused transition programs to be unsuccessful in a Midwest suburban school district. The continuation and growth of the district's transition programs are essential for supporting students with disabilities to meet their post-secondary goals. The survey response data shares barriers, such as transportation, new community partnerships, funding, parent/guardian involvement, and student motivation, which are limitations to further success within the transition programs. The two most considerable barriers that impact the transition programs' success are transportation and community partnerships. The transition program supplies students in special education with differing levels of support that provide transferable learning skills, routines, and expectations for post-secondary life. The researcher can link the barriers with recommendations for solutions to promote the effectiveness of the district's transition programs in the future.

Transportation is the leading barrier for students to participate in post-secondary transition programs. Typically, during the time spent in high school, the school district will provide transportation services for students participating in a transition program. The transportation barrier comes to fruition after graduation. When students exit the public school system, the resource of transportation tends to be missing and limits the

opportunity to participate in post-secondary opportunities. The school district's county has a limited selection of public transportation. The adult service agencies' post-secondary transition programs generally do not have private transportation options for participants. The county's inability to supply available public transportation reduces the school's competence in educating students on how to use the resources to navigate through the community efficiently. Transportation is a consistent long-term barrier that impacts the school district to partner with the adult service agencies and advance programs.

Creating and maintaining partnerships with community organizations appears to be an ongoing problem and has grown with the COVID-19 pandemic. Transition programs frequently take place off school campuses and in the community setting. Building positive community connections is imperative for school districts to identify new sites that can offer student opportunities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the school district's community organizations and schools were able to foster working relationships to provide opportunities for students to learn post-secondary transition skills. Community businesses generally desire to help schools and students until additional work for the organization or liability risks occurs. Knowledge appears absent for potential partners regarding the positive outcomes of installing transition programs within their organizations. The lack of organizing and scheduling meaningful conversations with community members and organizations restricts the expansion of post-secondary transition programs. The district's ability to form partnerships with local businesses was a barrier prior to COVID-19, but the limitations increased after the pandemic. The pandemic demolished partnerships between the district and a local

institute that worked collaboratively for over a decade to provide a transition program to students with disabilities. In addition to losing established relationships, securing new proponents became more challenging due to a comprehensive heightened level of health awareness. The district's ability to form working alliances with community stakeholders and organizations is vital to delivering opportunities to students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The researcher designed the program evaluation to address gaps in providing equitable and effective special education transition services. To obtain the information relevant to the effectiveness of the school district's transition programs, the researcher explored the school district staff/facility by disseminating a dissertation-team-created survey. The survey consisted of seven questions asking participants to provide input on how the district implements transition services, areas for improvement, program benefits, and overall effectiveness based on the student outcomes. The researcher also conducted interviews with staff/facility who initiated their willingness through a question in the survey. The interviews allowed the researcher to identify additional information relating to the school district's special education post-secondary transition services, programs, and opportunities.

The district's transition programs for students with disabilities provide exceptional services for individuals eligible to participate. When analyzing the response data to determine the district's special education transition program's gaps, the responses indicated that the programs should be universal within the special education population. The response data informs the researcher that the district focuses on students with developmental disabilities and overlooks the other disability categories to supply

transition service opportunities. Future researchers could conduct the study to evaluate post-secondary transition programs with various disability categories and report on the differences in required services, levels of support, program environments, and program outcomes for each of the different educational disability categories. The additional research and data collection could provide deeper insight for designing specialized post-secondary transition programs to meet the needs of all disability categories. If the research is implemented to create specialized transition programs, the student outcome data will determine if addressing transition skills by disability groups is an improved practice for post-secondary success.

To obtain qualitative data, the researcher utilized a dissertation-team-created survey. The surveys were sent to respondents on two different occasions to receive the minimum number of responses. Out of the 121 surveys that were disseminated, only 33 were returned. Out of the 33 surveys, 10 volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview. The researcher sent the initial survey to the respondents in December and sent a second email one month later during the school district's holiday break. The timing of when the survey was sent could be a reason for the low response rate. Future research could include sending a survey at a different time during the year and requesting survey responses more than twice from respondents.

The only identifying question asked was voluntary to maintain anonymity on the survey. The last question in the survey asked if the participant would like to participate in a follow-up interview to provide their contact information. Future researchers could include an optional question that asks staff/facility to list their job titles. Requesting the survey respondents' job titles will provide the researcher with background information on

how the respondent's position relates to the research topic. The researcher could not determine if the district's transition programs supplied opportunities in various settings, operated transition programs for students with disabilities with non-disabled peers, program success rates, and student outcome status one year removed from high school. Future studies would determine if the unidentified areas related to students with disabilities meeting their post-secondary transition goals.

### **Conclusion**

The school district's special education transition programs provide various services and opportunities to help students learn skills for success after graduation. The researcher was able to identify critical relationships, resources, successes, barriers, and programming opportunities that connect with a Midwest suburban school district's special education transition program. The exploration of implications and responses of the various education staff/facility provided the researcher with standard themes and factual information. The participant response data supported the researcher's program evaluation of the district's special education transition services and promoted the researcher's previously mentioned recommendations for future studies.

For the district's transition programs to be effective, the district relied on community partners, district staff, teacher investment, student motivation, essential resources, innovative leadership, and persistence from all stakeholders. The overall effectiveness of the district's transition programs is in support of effective practices, especially in comparison to local school districts. The qualitative results of the study also highlight that the transition programs can evolve and improve by reaching more students with other categories of needs.

The school district's special education transition services provide students with various internal and external services. Internally the district starts with providing the appropriate staff and professional development that supports students, families, and other team members. The district prioritizes transition skills in the classrooms with opportunities to transfer the skills to the community. Students with disabilities in the district can pursue various programs that promote a transition to a post-secondary setting. The district personnel prioritizes connecting students with disabilities with state-provided agencies that support students with resources during high school and into a post-secondary setting. The district's initiative to begin the process during high school is imperative to ensure the opportunities are not overlooked after graduation when the school is no longer a resource to support. The school district is creative in developing new opportunities and becomes flexible when necessary. The researcher can conclude that the school district's transition programs are effective services for high school students with disabilities. The research also suggests that the school district can grow its practices to serve additional students with disabilities.

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