

Making the Move to High School: Tips for Parents of Students with Disabilities

While in middle school*, your student with a disability has been working on many of the skills he or she will need to function in high school. Your student has met new people, changed classes every period, navigated the hallways, worked with multiple teachers, and used a locker. In high school, your child may encounter additional new situations, such as:

- Choosing elective classes
- Meeting graduation requirements
- Developing self-advocacy skills
- Dating
- Becoming a legal adult
- Planning for employment or continued education after graduation

Some families may be concerned about their child's move from middle to high school, but you can lay the groundwork for success by following these tips.

Develop a Transition Planning Timeline

As with other major changes in your child's life, the move to high school will go more smoothly if you gather information in advance and do some planning. In general, a good time to begin transition planning is six months prior to your child's last Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting in middle school. You may want to start earlier if your child has complex special needs.

Gather Information About the New School

Make an appointment to observe at the high school when classes are in session. An early visit is especially important if you have concerns about accessibility and safety. Ask your child's case manager who to contact at the new school to arrange a visit. While you are at the school:

- Ask for a copy of the student handbook, course offerings, graduation requirements, and a schedule of activities.
- Schedule a short appointment with the principal to introduce yourself and briefly explain your child's needs. Indicate your desire to work in partnership with the school to help your child succeed.

Talk with other parents whose children attend the school. You can gain helpful information from parents of children with or without disabilities.

* "Middle school" refers to middle school or junior high

Develop an IEP Team Plan

As you and the rest of the IEP team develop a transition plan for the move to high school, you may want to:

- Request that a representative from the high school be invited to your child's final IEP meeting in middle school.
- Find out if your district has a formal plan for transition to high school. Many districts offer an orientation tour or meeting at the high school for all students and parents. When a child has special needs, the team may want to consider other concerns in order to make orientation a more useful process.
 - Will one visit be enough for your student?
 - Will an interpreter be needed?
 - Will your child benefit from taking photos to view them during the summer break?

Accommodations such as these can be written into the plan.

Make sure your child's IEP identifies and addresses all of the new areas of concern and opportunity. You may want to ask the following questions.

- What accommodations are available so my child can participate in extracurricular activities?
- With whom will my child eat lunch? What steps will support social interaction and growth in areas of recreation and leisure?
- What are the attendance and discipline policies?
- Have my child's interests, strengths, and future plans been considered in the selection of classes and activities?
- Are accommodations needed in the cafeteria, library, restroom, or locker room?
- Have transportation needs been addressed?
- Will my child be required to meet all graduation requirements, or will some requirements be modified or waived altogether?

You may also want to identify a particular person to whom your teen may go if he or she feels confused, anxious, or overwhelmed. This person might be a school counselor, social worker, or other designated staff member.

Note: Does your child with a disability have a 504 accommodation plan instead of an IEP? If so, you will need to ask the high school's 504 coordinator to schedule a team meeting to develop a new plan. It will be helpful to share the middle school plan with the new school. Many of the strategies for IEP team planning will be useful to you as you devise a 504 accommodation plan that will help your child succeed in high school.

Encourage Self-Advocacy

The end of middle school is a good time to help your teen practice the self-advocacy skills expected and needed in high school. Self-advocacy skills include the ability to make decisions, communicate one's needs, and ask for help if necessary. They allow a student to be more successful in high school and beyond. Your child can develop these skills by participating on the IEP team as much as is appropriate. At the IEP meeting, you may want to ask:

- Are my child's ideas and requests taken into consideration as decisions are being made?
- Is the team encouraging my child to assume responsibility for explaining how he or she learns best, and asking for necessary support?

Prepare Your Child for the Move

Once you have determined where your child will attend high school, begin to casually introduce your child to the new school.

- Give your child a school sweatshirt or attend school sporting events or plays as a family. Doing so will allow your student to experience and feel part of the school community.
- Talk with your child about the high school and find out any concerns he or she may have. Talking with you about these issues may reduce your child's anxiety about the move.
- During the summer, make it a point to drive by the school a few times.
- Arrange a visit the week before school starts for your child to meet teachers and staff, practice self-advocacy skills, and become familiar with the building before it is crowded with other students. It may be helpful to:
 - Locate restrooms and water fountains, the nurse's and counselor's offices, the cafeteria, and the special education resource room.
 - Determine out the best routes between classrooms.
 - Practice using the hall and gym lockers. If the lockers or locks need to be changed to accommodate your child's needs, be sure to discuss this with administrators ahead of time.

The move from middle school to high school can be an exciting milestone and a time of growth. With advance planning and teamwork, this transition can be a positive experience for you and your child.