

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

College Planning for the Child with Special Needs: A Parent and Teacher Collaboration

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If you are working with parents of young children with special needs, college preparation is probably the furthest thing on their mind as they attempt navigate the confusing labyrinth of special education under *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and America's failing public education system. However, your third grader with learning deficits or fourth grader on the Spectrum today, will be a high school student tomorrow in a blink of an eye.

A college degree is not for everyone; especially today when many blue color professionals and tradesmen/women are making more than the college educated. It is not uncommon to pay much more for household electrical or plumbing services than it is to go see your family physician. With that being said, a college education is an admirable and attainable goal for most, even the student with special needs. For parents who have a child with special needs with the ability to pursue a two to four year degree, the preparation for college in high school is often overlooked as a majority of the time is focused on the child's *Individualized Educational Plan* (IEP), high school course completion, and special education services.

It is crucial for teachers to work closely with parents if the goal for their child with special needs is college. Formal college preparation begins in ninth grade. This is the time where all children should get in the mindset of life after high school. Teachers, parents and students with special needs must focus on academic success and course proficiency, not merely passing the required class work. Appropriate testing accommodations must be documented on the students' IEP and implemented everyday in the classroom. This will afford the child with special needs to have access to some or all of services they have become accustomed to on local and state assessments as they approach the college entrance exams such as the SAT and the ACT.

As special education practitioners, you are well aware that the IDEA places a legal responsibility on your public school district to provide a free and appropriate education to children between the ages of 3 and 21 who meet the requirements of one or more of 13 total disability classifications. What many teachers and parents do not realize is that these same legal requirements under the IDEA expire upon completion of high school. This means that colleges and universities do not have to honor a child's high school IEP at all. While protection under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) exists in terms of discrimination on the basis of one's disability, academic support and is not typically an area in which the ADA defends.

As a student exits high school and enters college the metamorphosis from a child to an adult takes place. Since colleges consider students to be adults, parents generally won't have a voice with college administrators and/or professors. Therefore, parents must work with their children to make sure appropriate college programs first

exist, and then continually communicate with their child once they are in college to make sure they are utilizing them. Teachers should be reinforcing to parents that no one in college will be chasing down their child to make sure they are attending extra-help sessions or individualized tutoring services. It is essential for all teachers and parents, especially ones with a child with special needs, to help their child/ren become as self-sufficient as possible. To alleviate some of your parent's anxiety surrounding the sendoff of their child to college, be sure to stress the importance of daily management skills as early as possible.

High school students of all cognitive levels need to learn how to manage personal finances, such as utilizing and balancing a personal checking account, using a debit card for everyday purchases, understanding credit cards and the impact of interest rates and the importance of saving cash. Independent daily living skills are of utmost importance for your students venturing off to live on a college campus. Basic skills such as cooking, cleaning, shopping and doing their own laundry will come as a shock to them if preparation for independent living was not conducted. These examples of added stress can have a direct impact on the academic success, or lack thereof, one experiences in the early semesters of the college experience.

Assisting mom and dad with the selection of an appropriate college for your student is the difficult part. Finding the “best” college and the “right” college for your student with special needs is critical. These two terms are not mutually exclusive to one another. Inform your parents that the college selection process begins a few years before high school graduation. Make sure your parents find out which schools offer programs of study that your students are actually interested in and want to pursue. Additionally, focus on college programs that can meet your student's special needs. If your student thrives in an environment where individualized attention is needed, you must tell parents to weed out schools where you know your student will get lost in the vast size of the college/university such as Penn State or the University of Maryland. Your students must select schools that have a disability resource center that ensures equal access to activities, programs and specific services that are similar to the ones they have experienced in high school, such as preferred or preferential seating in classrooms or lecture halls, note taking/scribe services, and separate locations for test taking. Lastly, the distance of the school to your student's home may also be an important factor to consider if your student wants to make frequent visits home or if mom and dad want to have quick access to their child.

During your student's junior year in high school, assist them in narrowing down their choices and have them make appointments to visit the schools. The only way your student can get a “feel” for a specific school is by walking throughout the campus and observing. Make sure your students investigate the resources offered and if possible, have them talk with current college students using them. Most importantly, stress to your parents that their child has to feel comfortable with the school. Reiterate that their son or daughter will do better academically in an environment that they, not mom and dad, feel the most relaxed in.

College selection is a stressful time for both parents and children. The only way to alleviate some of that stress is by preparing as early as possible. Assist your parents with the college selection process. This will make the entire experience a little less frightful and much more exciting for all. Remember, a college acceptance for a child with special needs is a direct reflection of their teacher/s hard work and dedication, as well.

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