

Building Independence

A Beginning

By Karen Kaplan

From the moment a student is placed in an educational program, the school should be thinking about how it is preparing the student to travel the road to independence.

While there is a wide range of cognitive, motor and communication abilities among students on the spectrum they all are on the road to acquire as much independence as they are able.

We are a culture rich in inter-dependence so it is acceptable for those who live with learning differences to have coaches, mentors, families, and friends to help them on the road.

Here are some questions I suggest teachers and families ask themselves when thinking about transition goals, objectives, classroom lessons and family supports so they can continually prepare students to reach independence.

- 1) How can we help a student to understand vocabulary words they will need as they travel the road to independence?
- 2) How can we help them remember personal information such as their name, phone number, address, birthdate, identification numbers or people to contact in an emergency?
- 3) How can we teach and motivate my students to have effective communication skills?
- 4) How do we help them develop effective listening skills?
- 5) How do we teach them to understand gesture language and voice meaning?
- 6) What mathematical skills can I teach so they can function at the highest level (calendar, measure, time, weight, money, thermometers?)
- 7) How can we help them understand their future educational opportunities (trade schools, community classes, colleges?)
- 8) How do we prepare students to determine their career interests and if those jobs fit their interests, skills, and challenges?
- 9) How do we prepare them to search for, interview for, apply for and maintain a job?
- 10) How do we teach them about salaries, budgets, payroll, and paychecks?
- 11) If they are readers, how do we teach abbreviations and what they stand for?
- 12) How will I teach them phone skills and finding phone numbers?
- 13) Today it is important that they know how to operate a computer. How do we teach this?
- 14) How will we teach them all about all the other technology devices they will come in contact with (camera, TV, CD and DVD)?
- 15) What creative ways can we teach food vocabularies including beverages and seasonings?
- 16) How will we teach restaurant vocabulary, package label information and food preparation documents?
- 17) How will we teach food costs and nutrition?
- 18) What lessons will be created on reading clothing labels for size, material, and cleaning?
- 19) What lessons will be developed for learning how to search for places to live and how to complete a rental agreement?
- 20) How will we teach our students about checking, savings, credit, and retirement?

- 21) Will the school want to create lessons around medical and health issues? Understanding medicines and medicine labels will be critical to being independence and what about making doctor appointments?
- 22) Will the school discuss sexuality, birth control or sexually transmitted diseases? All these areas come with the road to independence.
- 23) What will the school do about lessons on drug abuse?
- 24) How will you teach about transportation issues? (Traffic signs, traffic symbols, vehicles, driving licenses, road maps)
- 25) What resources will your school introduce students to (libraries, post offices, recreation facilities (movie theaters, parks, sports centers)?)
- 26) What lessons will your teachers create to teach warnings and safety signs such as (Police, fragile, explosives, poison, flammable, emergency exit, do not enter, beware of dog, private-keep out)
- 27) What lessons will teachers develop to teach the meaning of typical community signs such as (Taxi, Bus Stop, Toilet, Closed, Hospital, Ticket Office, please wait to be seated, Cashier, For Rent, No Refunds)
- 28) Will your school teach about voting?
- 29) How will you teach your students about self-advocacy?

The above questions are just a small representation of the types of transition skills schools should address if serving K-12 on their way to becoming independent adults. While all skills might not be attainable, parts of them may be. It is always important to think capable and find ways to creatively teach these key skills. This is a team responsibility. Make sure the families are part of the transition planning and implementing.