

Support Youth with Significant Disabilities Get Equal Opportunities to Become Productive, Responsible, Contributing Citizens of Society in Adulthood

Cosponsor the Transitioning towards Excellence & Achievement in Mobility through Education (TEAM-Education) Act of 2011

POLICY OVERVIEW

Despite significant public expenditures in special education, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities frequently transition out of high school lacking the proper skills required to find and maintain employment or pursue post-secondary education. This trend is due to a lack of focus or knowledge in how to effectively provide hands-on work experience and training (including mentoring, internships, summer work programs, and career development) to youth with significant disabilities that is typically offered to non-disabled students during their transitional years. Instead, low expectations dominate individualized education plans (IEPs) for students with special needs despite the potential and desire of many students, their families, and their teachers to have the youth pursue opportunities that will help them gain experience to better prepare them for the workforce and adulthood. Although the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to provide transition services to support students with disabilities during their high school years, there currently lacks no enforcement, monitoring or evaluation of school districts to ensure that there is strong compliance with this important provision in the law.

It is no surprise then that upon exiting the school system, these young citizens are woefully unprepared and unsupported in finding and maintaining employment in the community and at wages which promote optimal self-sufficiency and independence. Yet research demonstrates that when provided with preparatory, hands-on job experience in the form of part-time work, internships, or summer employment, individuals with significant disabilities can successfully obtain and sustain work in integrated settings and earn competitive wages.

PURPOSE OF LEGISLATION

The TEAM legislation provides three separate legislative responses to better align existing federal programs providing publically-funded systems and supports to focus on one uniform goal – ensuring that every youth with a significant disability has the opportunity, encouragement and support to become gainfully employed in an integrated setting, pursue a post-secondary education, and contribute to and meaningfully engage in typical community settings upon leaving high school.

TEAM-EDUCATION ACT OF 2011: BILL SUMMARY

The TEAM-Education Act (H.R. 602) amends IDEA to encourage and empower schools districts, states educational authorities, students with significant disabilities, their families and transition teams to plan for and achieve employment in an integrated setting at minimum wage or higher after high school.

- ❖ **Adds requirements to ensure Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) holistically address the transition needs of students:** Under this bill, the IEP changes the age when transition planning must be included in a student's IEP starting at age 14, and allows the State Intellectual/Developmental Disability (I/DD) Agency to participate on the IEP & transition planning team for students expected to be eligible for adult I/DD services. The bill further requires the IEP to include comprehensive transition planning and services, including objectives for developing the skills, knowledge-base, training and experience to successfully obtain integrated employment, economic self-sufficiency, independent living and community involvement. Additionally, the bill offers advocacy training for students and families to help them prepare better for articulating the wishes of the student during the IEP process.
- ❖ **Allows for IDEA Part B discretionary dollars to be used by school districts to hire or contract with professionals possessing transition expertise for youth with significant disabilities:** The legislation clarifies that school districts are allowed and encouraged to use IDEA discretionary funds for either

hiring transition experts within or contracting out transition services as needed, based on stringent criteria that these contracts be focused on the preparation and confirmation of integrated, competitive employment or other desired post-secondary education outcomes.

- ❖ **Modifies the Definition of *Transition Services*:** Ensures that the definition of transition services includes customized employment services and training in advocacy and self-determination activities to better prepare youth for job preparation and advocating on their own behalf. Additionally, the bill clarifies that transition services do not include facility-based or other segregated programs.
- ❖ **Establishes Support for Local Transition Coordinators:** Provides \$50 million to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to pilot the hiring of internal transition services coordinators who would be responsible for facilitating relationships with public and private entities on behalf of the student and the student's family to ensure the successful provision of desired transition services necessary to achieving the student's transition objectives.

POLICY RATIONALE

The goal of publically-funded transition services and supports for youth with disabilities should be focused on helping youth with significant disabilities acquire the skills, knowledge and experience required to successfully obtain a job in an integrated setting at minimum wage or higher, ensure maximum community participation and achieve optimal self-sufficiency. To achieve this goal, Congress must establish a coordinated, comprehensive approach to the investment of public resources that expands and improves the choices of youth with significant disabilities who are transitioning into adulthood to ensure the design and execution of an individualized, coordinated strategy aimed at securing meaningful post-secondary educational opportunities, career development and training, supported employment in an integrated setting, and inclusion in the community setting through independent living and social engagement.

The TEAM-Education Act (H.R. 602) would streamline the transition process at the high-school level and require coordination and collaboration between the state education authority and the State I/DD authority to maximize the efficient use of resources through systems alignment. Clarifying that facility based or other segregated experiences are not acceptable transition services will focus IEP teams on having high expectations of all students and in identifying opportunities that lead to integrated employment, post secondary education, independent living and optimal self-sufficiency for students with significant disabilities. The legislation ensures that the newest and most promising practices for assisting students in finding, creating and maintaining employment are implemented, rather than promoting a continued dismissal of the potential of students with disabilities to become productive citizens and contribute in meaningful ways to their communities.

ACTION REQUIRED

Congressional leaders dedicated to improving the future opportunities of youth with significant disabilities through fiscally responsible, innovative systems-reform strategies are encouraged to co-sponsor all three of the following legislative proposals: TEAM-Education Act of 2011; Team-Empowerment Act of 2011; and TEAM-Employment Act of 2011. **To cosponsor one or more of these innovative legislative bills, please contact Scot Malvaney in the Office of U.S. Representative Gregg Harper (R-MS) at scot.malvaney@mail.house.gov or 202-225-5031.**