

Data-Driven Life Skills and Transition Planning in Special Education: A Replicable Framework for Improving Postsecondary Readiness and Independence

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Abstract- This article develops and tests a practical framework for data-driven transition planning in special education, with particular attention to life skills instruction, functional academics, community participation and post-school readiness. Using a secondary ecological analysis of official FFY 2022 U.S. state special education performance files, the study examines six IDEA-aligned indicators across 51 jurisdictions: graduation (B1), dropout (B2), secondary transition compliance (B13), higher education participation (B14A), higher education or competitive employment (B14B), and any education, training or employment (B14C). The analysis shows strong interstate variation in post-school outcomes. Mean B13 performance was relatively high (81.25%), yet its simple state-level relationship with B14B was negligible ($r = 0.02$), suggesting that compliance-oriented completion of transition planning requirements does not automatically translate into stronger adult outcomes. By contrast, dropout was moderately and negatively associated with higher education participation ($r = -0.47$), indicating the continuing importance of school completion and early warning systems. Texas illustrates the implementation challenge clearly: the state recorded a high B13 score (98.59%) and above-mean B14A participation (28.42%), but fell below the 51-jurisdiction mean on B14B and B14C. Drawing on transition and disability literature, the article argues that transition planning should be treated as an instructional, ecological and interagency process rather than a documentation exercise. A six-component replicable framework is proposed, integrating assessment, explicit goal architecture, life skills instruction, community-based learning, family and agency coordination, and quarterly outcome monitoring. The article concludes that stronger postsecondary readiness requires tighter alignment between individualized education programmes, measurable daily instruction,

authentic community experiences and decision rules derived from real-time student data.

Keywords: Special Education, Transition Planning, Life Skills, Postsecondary Readiness, Independent Living, Community-Based Instruction, IDEA, Data-Driven Decision Making

I. INTRODUCTION

Preparation for further education, employment and independent living sits at the centre of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and this policy emphasis makes transition planning one of the most consequential functions in secondary special education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Yet schools frequently struggle to convert transition planning from a compliance task into a coherent instructional system that changes adult outcomes.

In many settings, goals are written, meetings are held and forms are completed, but the daily ecology of learning, family coordination, community exposure and progress monitoring remains too weak to move students consistently toward post-school independence.

That tension is especially important for learners with significant support needs, including students requiring life skills instruction, adaptive behaviour supports, structured routines, communication scaffolds and carefully sequenced community participation. Research has repeatedly shown that post-school success is linked not only to formal plan quality, but also to self-determination, work

experiences, family engagement, authentic assessment, early transition services and school structures that sustain implementation over time (Shogren et al., 2015; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Dong, Fabian and Luecking, 2016; Lee et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the most persuasive approach to transition is not a narrow IEP-writing exercise, but a longitudinal process that links present levels of performance, measurable goals, curriculum access, functional routines, work-based learning, agency referrals and post-school tracking.

For practitioners working in life skills and inclusive special education contexts, this issue is immediate rather than theoretical. Students who need explicit instruction in daily living, communication, social participation, adaptive regulation and vocational readiness cannot rely on aspiration alone.

They require a structured sequence of assessment, instruction, rehearsal, generalisation and review. The practical question is therefore not whether transition should be planned, but how planning can be made instructionally real, data-sensitive and replicable across schools.

This article addresses that question through a combined literature-informed and data-analytic approach. First, it reviews research on the components most consistently associated with stronger post-school outcomes. Second, it analyses official FFY 2022 state performance data to identify how selected transition indicators relate to one another at jurisdiction level.

Third, it uses those findings to propose a replicable framework for schools serving learners with disabilities, especially those whose pathways to adulthood depend on sustained life skills instruction and coordinated transition support.

In keeping with evidence-informed model design, the article also draws selectively on broader framework-building work by Chitengu and Mupa (2026a, 2026b), particularly their emphasis on practical toolkits, structured implementation logic and context-sensitive evaluation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Transition planning as a predictor-rich process

The literature on transition-age youth with disabilities increasingly converges on one major finding: stronger adult outcomes emerge when schools move beyond symbolic planning and provide linked sets of experiences, supports and measurements.

Mazzotti et al. (2016), Tirivavengi et al (2026), in a systematic review of National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 secondary analyses, identify recurring predictors of post-school success that include paid work during school, vocational education, inclusion, self-care and social skill development, parent expectations, and student involvement in transition planning.

Lee et al. (2023) similarly conclude that effective secondary services work best when they are bundled rather than isolated, combining instruction, planning, support coordination and authentic practice in natural settings.

Student agency is a particularly important strand in this literature. Shogren et al. (2015) demonstrate meaningful associations between self-determination and later post-school outcomes, reinforcing the view that transition planning should cultivate decision making, self-advocacy and goal ownership.

Cavendish and Connor (2018) argue that transition documents become more authentic when student, parent and teacher perspectives are genuinely integrated, while Cavendish, Connor and Rediker (2017) show that active student and family participation improves both the relevance and the credibility of transition-focused IEPs.

These findings suggest that good planning is not merely technically correct planning; it is planning that can be understood, enacted and owned by the learner and the learner's support network.

2.2 Family, agency and ecological supports

A second major strand concerns family and interagency coordination. Families often navigate complex systems of disability services, postsecondary supports, benefits, transportation

arrangements and employment pathways, yet they are not always systematically equipped to participate in transition processes.

Hirano et al. (2018) identify structural barriers that inhibit family involvement, including institutional communication patterns, time constraints and fragmented service systems. Sanderson and Bumble (2023) further show that parents of transition-age youth frequently worry about employment, safety, independent living and sustained adult support.

These concerns imply that school teams need more than a meeting-based model of collaboration; they need continuity tools, referral pathways and explicit action tracking.

The role of community-based and work-based learning is equally important. Anderson et al. (2024) find strong support for community-based instruction as a means of building generalisable skills for learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities, while Hopkins and Dymond (2020) show that teachers' use of community-based instruction is shaped by contextual conditions, logistics and institutional decision making.

Transition planning is therefore partly an organisational design problem: schools must create timetables, staffing patterns, data systems and risk-management procedures that allow real-world instruction to occur. Supported and employer-based interventions also matter.

Wehman et al. (2014), Wehman et al. (2017) and Iwanaga et al. (2023) report stronger employment-related outcomes where structured employment supports are provided to transition-age youth, including those with intellectual disability and autism.

2.3 Timing, assessment and developmental sequencing

Timing is another recurrent issue. Cimera, Burgess and Bedesem (2014) suggest that earlier transition services can improve vocational outcomes for students with intellectual disability, while Rowe et al. (2015) highlight the importance of modern transition assessment systems that capture the student's

developing profile in ways that can guide instruction and service design.

Taken together, this body of work indicates that transition planning should be developmental, data-generating and action-oriented. It should identify whether the student is moving toward work, further education, supported employment, community participation and greater independence; it should also identify quickly when progress is stalling.

For learners with autism and other developmental disabilities, post-school outcomes often remain fragile without sustained environmental support. Bouck and Park (2018) show the complexity of post-school trajectories for students with autism spectrum disorder, while Snell-Rood et al. (2020) document stakeholder concerns about the quality and implementation of transition planning for this population.

These studies reinforce the need for transition frameworks that integrate behaviour support, communication, family partnership and authentic community participation. The implication for schools is clear: transition planning must connect adaptive instruction, daily routines and post-school ecology if it is to produce durable outcomes.

III. METHODS

3.1 Data sources and design

This study used a secondary ecological design based on public state-level special education performance data. Four official FFY 2022 Office of Special Education Programs datasets were analysed: Indicator B1 (graduation), Indicator B2 (dropout), Indicator B13 (secondary transition) and Indicator B14 (post-school outcomes).

The analytic sample covered 51 jurisdictions, comprising the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. For the B14A item alone, the official files contained 51,452 respondent youth nationally, including 2,654 respondents from Texas.

Because the unit of analysis was the jurisdiction rather than the individual student, the findings are

best interpreted as system-level patterns rather than causal student-level effects.

Six variables were retained for the main analysis: B1 graduation, B2 dropout, B13 transition IEP compliance/completeness, B14A higher education, B14B higher education or competitive employment, and B14C any education, training or employment. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each indicator.

Pearson correlations were then estimated to examine simple relationships between school completion, transition planning and post-school outcomes. To illuminate implementation gaps, a planning–outcome difference score was created by subtracting B14B from B13, thereby identifying jurisdictions with strong reported transition planning performance but weaker post-school placement results.

Texas was benchmarked against the 51-jurisdiction mean because it offers a useful practical case for a life-skills and transition-oriented model: its B13 performance was high, yet its broader B14 results remained mixed.

The analytic purpose was not to rank systems for its own sake, but to identify whether a compliance-heavy transition model is sufficient. If high B13 performance aligned closely with post-school indicators, one would expect meaningful positive correlations and relatively small planning–outcome gaps.

If not, then the results would support a more instructionally integrated framework in which life skills teaching, family coordination, community access and post-school tracking carry greater explanatory weight.

Table 1. Indicator architecture used in the analysis

Indicator	Construct	Role in analysis	Operational use
B1	Graduation	School completion anchor	FFY2022 state percentage
B2	Dropout	Risk anchor	FFY2022

			2 state percentage
B13	Transition IEP quality/completeness	Planning/compliance anchor	FFY2022 state percentage
B14A	Higher education	College-going outcome	FFY2022 state percentage
B14B	Higher education or competitive employment	Core post-school success outcome	FFY2022 state percentage
B14C	Any education/training or employment	Broader participation outcome	FFY2022 state percentage

Note. Indicators were drawn from official FFY 2022 OSEP State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report files and analysed at jurisdiction level.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive patterns across 51 jurisdictions

Table 2 shows substantial variation across the 51 jurisdictions. Mean graduation performance (B1) was 73.83%, while mean dropout (B2) was 17.58%. Transition IEP performance (B13) averaged 81.25%, considerably higher than the means for B14A higher education (25.27%), B14B higher education or competitive employment (64.08%), and B14C any education, training or employment (77.83%).

At a descriptive level, this pattern already hints at slippage between formal transition planning and realised post-school outcomes.

The correlation heatmap reinforces that interpretation. Graduation and dropout were moderately and inversely related ($r = -0.57$), which is consistent with expectations. Dropout also showed a moderate negative relationship with higher education participation (B14A; $r = -0.47$), indicating that school completion remains foundational to later transitions.

However, B13 exhibited only weak simple relationships with B14A ($r = 0.17$), B14B ($r = 0.02$) and B14C ($r = 0.04$). At jurisdiction level, therefore, stronger reported compliance on transition IEP requirements did not by itself map onto stronger post-school outcomes.

This result should not be misunderstood as evidence that transition planning is unimportant. Rather, it suggests that a narrow compliance interpretation of transition planning is insufficient.

When schools record that goals, services and required IEP elements are present, they may still differ greatly in the instructional intensity, authenticity of community experiences, family coordination and quality of follow-through available to students.

In practical terms, systems can score highly on paperwork quality while still underperforming on the ecological work that makes adulthood transitions viable.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for selected IDEA transition indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD	Min	Q1	Median	Q3	Max
B1 graduation	73.83	10.22	47.15	68.65	74.47	81.09	89.89
B2 dropout	17.58	7.63	3.96	11.90	15.84	23.73	35.12
B13 transition IEP	81.25	22.24	7.42	67.10	92.84	98.27	100.00
B14A higher education	25.27	9.28	7.64	18.43	23.44	29.83	52.35
B14B higher ed/competitive employment	64.08	10.16	38.88	57.00	65.05	70.01	92.41
B14C any ed/training or employment	77.83	8.76	54.38	72.95	76.74	81.59	100.00

Note. Author's calculations from FFY 2022 official state-level indicator files.

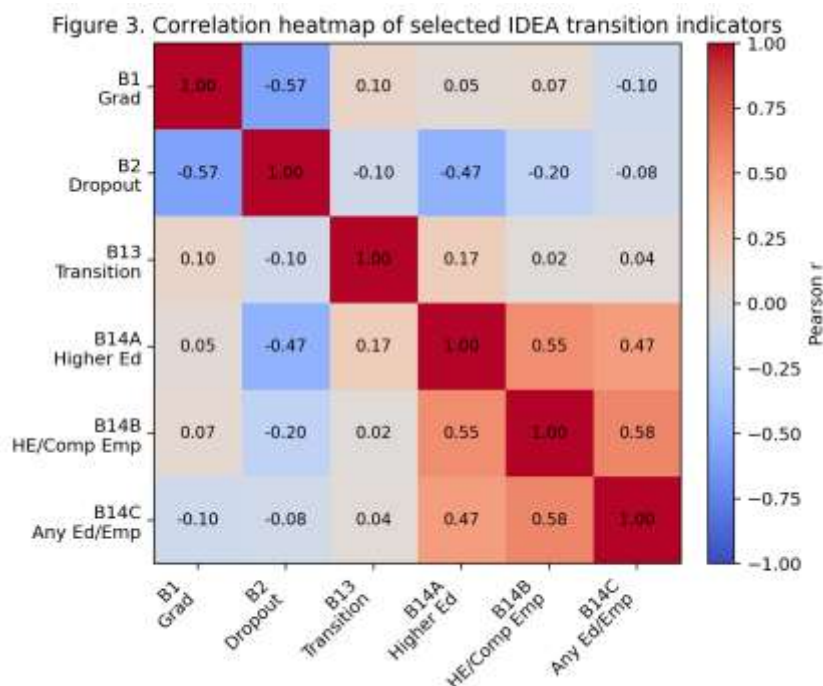


Figure 1. Correlation heatmap of selected IDEA transition indicators. Author's analysis of FFY 2022 official state data.

4.2 Trend and benchmarking analysis

Figure 2 adds a trend perspective. National mean graduation increased between FFY 2017 and FFY 2020 before softening to 73.83% by FFY 2022, while national mean dropout rose notably after FFY 2019. Texas showed an especially sharp discontinuity: graduation performance dropped from 77.90% in FFY 2019 to 44.77% in FFY 2020, then recovered only partially to 49.34% by FFY 2022.

Texas dropout, by contrast, rose from below 2% before FFY 2020 to more than 15% in FFY 2022. Although these administrative patterns should be interpreted cautiously, they underline the vulnerability of transition systems when educational continuity is disrupted.

Texas is analytically instructive because its profile is mixed rather than uniformly weak. The state posted a very strong B13 value of 98.59%, placing it well above the 51-jurisdiction mean of 81.25%. Texas also exceeded the national mean on B14A higher education (28.42% versus 25.27%).

Yet Texas remained below the mean on B14B higher education or competitive employment (58.85% versus 64.08%) and B14C any education, training or employment (70.17% versus 77.83%). This divergence is precisely the pattern that a life-skills and transition-oriented framework must address: planning requirements may be met, but broader readiness and participation outcomes still lag.

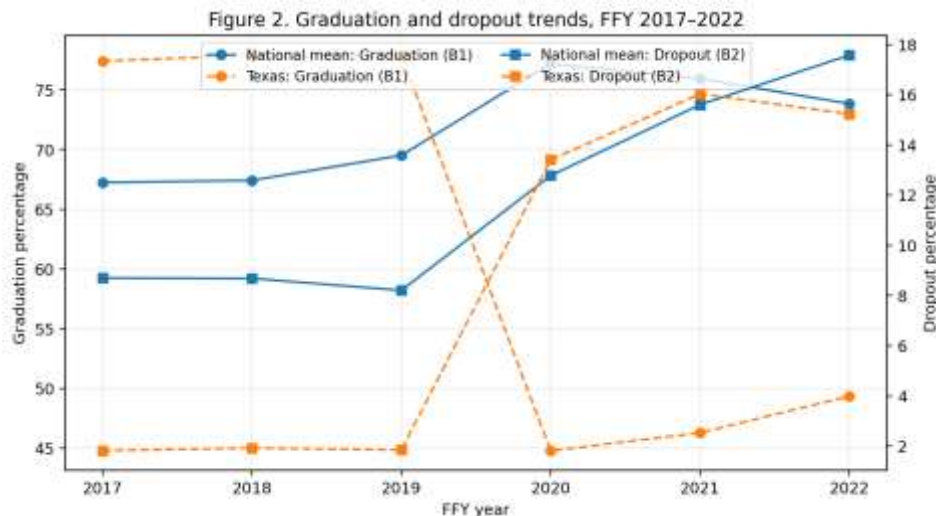


Figure 2. Graduation and dropout trends, FFY 2017–2022. Lines compare Texas with the 51-jurisdiction mean.

Table 3. Texas benchmarked against the 51-jurisdiction mean

Indicator	Texas	51-jurisdiction mean	Difference
Graduation (B1)	49.34	73.83	-24.49
Dropout (B2)	15.23	17.58	-2.35
Transition IEP quality/compliance (B13)	98.59	81.25	17.34
Higher education (B14A)	28.42	25.27	3.15
Higher ed or competitive	58.85	64.08	-5.23

employment (B14B)			
Any postsecondary education/training or employment (B14C)	70.17	77.83	-7.66

Note. Positive differences indicate Texas exceeds the mean; negative differences indicate Texas falls below it.

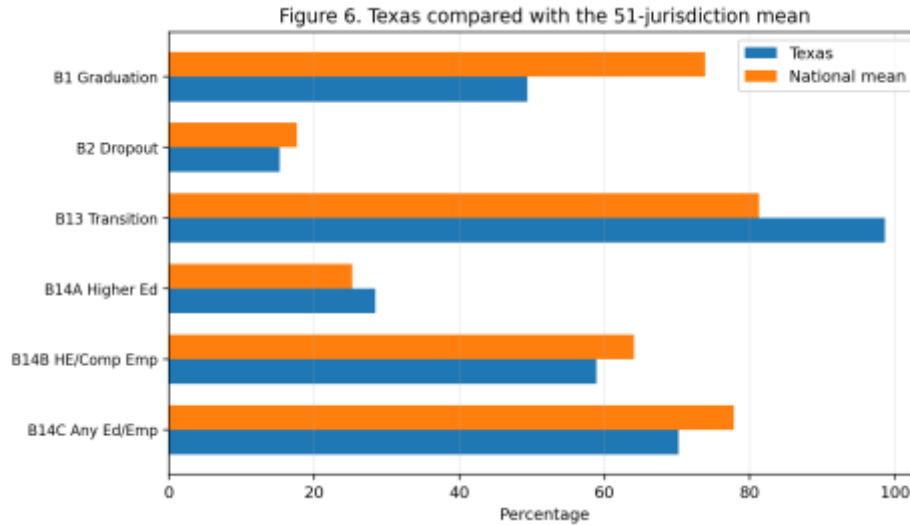


Figure 3. Texas compared with the 51-jurisdiction mean across six indicators.

4.3 Planning–outcome gaps and interstate contrasts

The planning outcome gap analysis sharpens the point further. Texas recorded a B13–B14B gap of 39.74 percentage points, placing it among the ten largest such gaps in the sample. Other jurisdictions with very large gaps included Michigan, Rhode Island, Iowa and Ohio. Moreover, thirteen jurisdictions combined transition-planning performance above the median with B14B outcomes below the median.

These patterns indicate that the field should be cautious about equating documented transition processes with implemented transition systems.

The top and bottom B14B jurisdictions also reveal that multiple pathways to success exist. Connecticut and New Jersey combined strong B14B outcomes with strong B13 values, suggesting relatively effective alignment between planning and placement. By contrast, Vermont achieved a high B14B value despite a notably lower B13 score, implying that factors outside documented transition compliance may sometimes carry significant weight.

In the lowest-performing group, Michigan, Rhode Island and Iowa all reported transition IEP values

above 92%, yet remained well below the national mean on B14B. Taken together, these findings favour a systems interpretation in which implementation quality, context and ecological supports matter at least as much as compliance presence.

Table 4. Ten largest gaps between transition planning scores and post-school placement scores

State	Cod e	B13 transio n IEP	B14B HE/Comp . emp.	Gap (B13-B14B)
Michigan	MI	92.84	38.97	53.87
Rhode Island	RI	99.98	48.55	51.43
Iowa	IA	100.00	48.79	51.21
Ohio	OH	99.96	53.14	46.82
Oklahoma	OK	99.73	53.73	46.00
Kansas	KS	99.13	56.20	42.93
Idaho	ID	96.18	53.40	42.78
Alaska	AK	96.32	55.02	41.30
Washington	WA	98.17	58.36	39.81
Texas	TX	98.59	58.85	39.74

Note. Gap = B13 transition IEP score minus B14B higher education or competitive employment score.

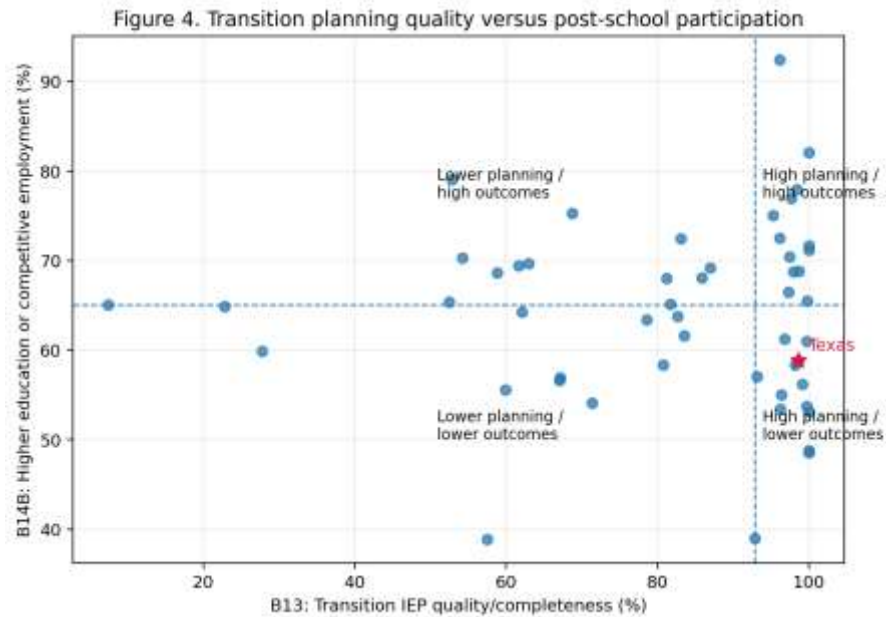


Figure 4. Quadrant plot of B13 transition planning and B14B post-school placement. Texas falls in the high-planning/lower-outcomes quadrant.

Table 5. Illustrative top and bottom jurisdictions on B14B

Group	State	B14B HE/Comp. emp.	B13 transition on IEP	B14 A higher ed	B14C any ed/emp.
Top 5	Connecticut	92.41	96.12	45.20	98.30
Top 5	New Jersey	82.05	100.00	52.35	91.03
Top 5	Vermont	79.08	52.82	18.88	86.73
Top 5	New Mexico	77.93	98.37	31.65	84.20
Top 5	Delaware	76.96	97.64	38.93	81.23
Bottom 5	District of Columbia	38.88	57.50	27.1	54.38

Bottom 5	Of Columbia			9	
Bottom 5	Michigan	38.97	92.84	21.91	77.50
Bottom 5	Rhode Island	48.55	99.98	30.83	76.78
Bottom 5	Iowa	48.79	100.00	15.09	71.02
Bottom 5	Ohio	53.14	99.96	19.49	100.00

Note. Top and bottom groups are shown to highlight that strong or weak post-school outcomes may coexist with very different B13 profiles.

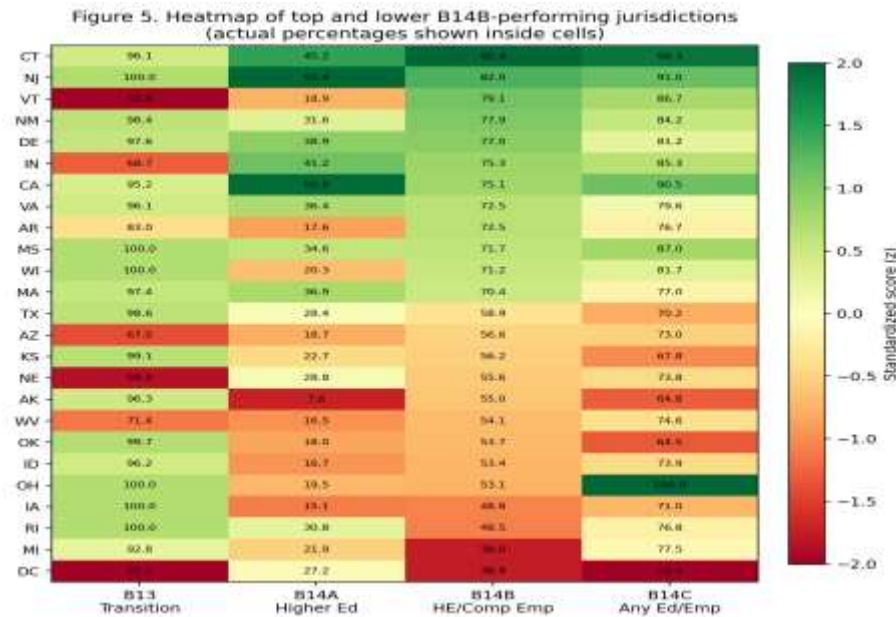


Figure 5. State-by-indicator heat map for Texas and selected comparator jurisdictions.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings support a central argument of this article: transition planning is most effective when it functions as a data-driven instructional architecture rather than a stand-alone compliance routine. The weak association between B13 and post-school indicators suggests that formal inclusion of required IEP components is only one layer of the work. Schools must still help learners acquire the routines, communication skills, adaptive behaviours, self-management capacities and community competencies that make adult participation realistic.

This interpretation is fully consistent with the transition literature. The strongest predictors identified by Mazzotti et al. (2016) are not purely document-based. They include employment experiences, social skills, inclusion, family expectations and student engagement.

Likewise, Anderson et al. (2024) and Hopkins and Dymond (2020) emphasise that community-based instruction depends on the operational decisions of the school, not only on the wording of goals. When these insights are read alongside the present state-level findings, the implication is clear: schools should monitor not only whether transition elements exist,

but whether students are actually rehearsing adult roles in increasingly authentic contexts.

For life-skills programmes, this means that transition planning should be visible in daily teaching. Functional academics must be linked to real-world demands such as managing time, handling money, reading environmental print, communicating needs and navigating adult routines. Behaviour and self-regulation support should prepare students for less scaffolded settings.

Community-based instruction should not be occasional enrichment; it should be part of the instructional core for students whose adult participation depends on generalisation. Similarly, work exposure needs to progress from simulated tasks to supported real contexts, with feedback loops that allow teams to adjust instruction quickly.

Family and agency coordination also require more structure. Hirano et al. (2018) and Sanderson and Bumble (2023) show that families often need practical support to navigate fragmented systems. A data-driven model therefore needs continuity tools: who has been contacted, which referrals have been made, whether transportation has been discussed, whether vocational rehabilitation has been engaged,

what housing or adult day options exist, and what post-school barriers remain unresolved.

Without this kind of action tracking, the transition plan may remain administratively compliant but operationally thin.

The Texas pattern is especially useful for practice because it exemplifies the gap between planning scores and broader outcomes without implying system failure in every dimension. High B13 performance indicates that teams can and do complete formal transition requirements.

The challenge is to convert that procedural strength into wider post-school participation. For schools serving students with extensive support needs, the solution is unlikely to be more paperwork; it is more disciplined implementation, more authentic learning opportunities and more frequent use of decision data tied to independence and adult roles.

VI. A REPLICABLE FRAMEWORK FOR DATA-DRIVEN TRANSITION PLANNING

On the basis of the literature and the state-level analysis, a replicable six-component framework is proposed. The framework is intended for secondary special education settings, especially life-skills and inclusive programmes serving learners with developmental, adaptive and communication needs. It treats transition planning as a cyclical system in which assessment, instruction, coordination and outcome monitoring are continuously linked.

First, schools should establish a baseline profile using age-appropriate transition assessment, current levels of functional performance, student voice and family priorities. Second, these inputs should be translated into a goal architecture that connects measurable postsecondary goals to courses of study, services and annual IEP targets.

Third, instructional delivery should focus on functional academics, self-determination, communication, daily living and behaviour supports using weekly mastery checks. Fourth, community and work exposure should be organised as a progression from structured practice to authentic

contexts, supported by travel training, employer feedback and task analyses.

Fifth, family and agency coordination should be recorded through meeting logs, referrals and action plans rather than left to informal recollection. Sixth, schools should review outcome dashboards quarterly, integrating indicators analogous to completion, dropout risk, participation, work exposure and post-school readiness.

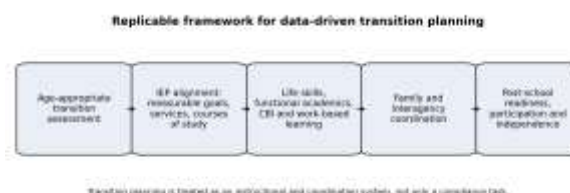


Figure 6. Replicable framework for data-driven transition planning.

Table 6. Operational components of the proposed framework

Framework component	Core practice	Data mechanism	Output
1. Baseline profiling	Assessment of interests, support needs, adaptive and academic baselines	Baseline profile, student/family input, task and skill inventories	Updated profile each term
2. Goal architecture	Convert assessment into measurable post-school goals and aligned services	Goal-attainment scaling, course-of-study mapping, service log	IEP with explicit outcome chain
3. Instructional delivery	Deliver functional academics, communication, self-care and	Weekly mastery checks, task analyses, behaviour and	Instruction adjusted from data

	self-determination	attendance data	
4. Community and work exposure	Provide community-based instruction, work exposure and travel training	Participation logs, coach/employer feedback, travel/community rubrics	Progression to authentic contexts
5. Family and agency coordination	Coordinate with families and adult agencies through structured planning	Meeting records, referrals, follow-up tracker, family action plan	Documented interagency action steps
6. Outcome monitoring	Track quarterly progress and adjust plans when trajectory weakens	Dashboard of completion, dropout and post-school readiness indicators	Quarterly review and intervention triggers

Note. The framework treats transition planning as an instructional and coordination system rather than a once-yearly documentation event.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

This framework is deliberately replicable rather than heroic. It does not depend on unusual technology or specialist staffing alone. It depends instead on disciplined routines: a clear baseline, measurable targets, frequent checks, structured collaboration and timely decisions.

The broader implementation lesson aligns with Chitengu and Mupa (2026a, 2026b), who argue in other educational contexts that practical toolkits and evidence-informed evaluation systems improve the likelihood that good intentions are translated into repeatable practice.

In practical school terms, the framework can be operationalised through a termly transition dashboard.

Such a dashboard would include attendance, behaviour support status, progress on at least one functional routine, community participation events, work-based exposure, family contact milestones and readiness markers linked to the student's post-school goals.

When progress stalls, pre-defined decision rules should trigger intensified supports, new practice opportunities or renewed agency engagement. This is how transition planning becomes data-driven: the team does not wait for an annual meeting to discover that the student's adult pathway remains underdeveloped.

- Schools should align life skills instruction with explicit post-school outcome categories rather than treating adaptive instruction as separate from transition planning.
- Quarterly dashboards should monitor completion risk, dropout warnings, functional skill mastery, community participation and work exposure.
- Family and agency coordination should be logged as a standing implementation activity, with assigned responsibilities and follow-up dates.
- States and districts should interpret high B13 performance cautiously unless it is accompanied by evidence that students are securing meaningful post-school placements.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

This study has limitations. Because the analysis uses state-level rather than student-level data, it cannot establish causal effects or identify which local practices explain jurisdictional differences. Administrative definitions and reporting conventions may also vary across states.

The sharp shifts observed around FFY 2020 and afterwards should therefore be read with caution. In addition, B13 captures formal transition compliance/completeness rather than implementation depth. The weak B13 correlations identified here should not be interpreted as evidence against

transition planning itself, but rather as evidence that formal planning indicators are incomplete proxies for instructional quality.

CONCLUSION

Postsecondary readiness for students with disabilities is too important to be left at the level of documentation. The present analysis shows that transition-planning compliance, although necessary, does not automatically deliver stronger post-school participation. Jurisdictions can score highly on B13 and still produce comparatively weak employment or broader participation outcomes.

The most credible response is to treat transition planning as an instructional and ecological system: assess early, teach explicitly, practise authentically, coordinate deliberately and review progress with real data. For life-skills and inclusive special education programmes, this approach offers a practical route to improving independence, participation and adult readiness in ways that are measurable, replicable and educationally meaningful.

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