



What to Know About the Diploma Track

By Emily D. Iland

©2012, All rights reserved.

Used with Permission by the Autism Society of Los Angeles

www.AutismLA.org

Many bright and capable students with autism spectrum disorders who have adequate academic skills in high school are often ill-prepared higher education and the workplace. They may not have been given sufficient opportunity and support to develop the social, communication, academic, leisure and personal living skills needed for successful post-secondary experiences. The result of poor transition planning in many cases is inadequate preparation for life after high school and less-than-desirable outcomes, in spite of good potential.

Due to the nature of autism, specialized training in social, communication, academic, vocational, behavioral, community-based and independent living skills are likely to be necessary for successful post-secondary outcomes for everyone on the autism spectrum, including students with average cognitive skills who attend general education classes or access grade-level curriculum. Unfortunately, there is a policy dichotomy in the education system, separating students with disabilities into “diploma track” and “functional/adaptive track.”

Those on the “functional/adaptive track” can stay in special education until the 22nd birthday, and are enrolled in community-based programs to build skills needed for life after high school. Those on the diploma track are exited from special education around age 17 or 18 because they receive a diploma, whether or not their transition needs in all areas related to their disability have been identified and met. Being tracked by the school district as “diploma bound” can limit access to needed services and supports that are guaranteed to students with disabilities through the Individual Transition Plan, (ITP) a component of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Because of the heavy academic load and requirements for graduation, “diploma-bound” students with Autism Spectrum Disorders usually do not receive the same level of assessment, training and services provided to those on the spectrum who will not be getting a diploma. There is not enough time in a four-year high school program to provide both academic training required for graduation AND the social, communication, academic, leisure and personal living skills needed for successful post-secondary experiences that are offered to other students on

the spectrum, in spite of the fact that the programs and services already exist. Diploma-bound students are seldom assessed in *all* areas of potential need in transition planning, and their transition plans are unlikely to provide services and supports that address all areas of need.

The solution is to assess diploma bound students with ASD in all areas of need and provide adequate transition services and supports until goals are met in all identified areas of need. This may take longer than the standard 4-year high school program, and may be continued through existing transition opportunities and similar venues offered to non-diploma bound students with ASD. The second part of the solution is to prevent “forced exit” from special education by the awarding of a diploma if adequate and meaningful transition planning and services have not been provided to the student to adequately prepare them with social, communication, academic, vocational, behavioral, community-based and independent living skills.