

THE SPECIAL EDGE

Informing parents, educators, service providers, and policymakers of research-based and promising practices, state and federal laws and policies, and the successes and challenges of dedicated educational partners as they work to improve and strengthen special education services for students with disabilities in California

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Inclusive College for All

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Letter from the State Director

The expectations we hold for students on the first day of school often shape the opportunities available to them for years to come. Every student, including students with disabilities, should be welcomed with the assumption of competence, access to rigorous learning, and a clear pathway toward college, career, and meaningful participation in their communities.

That first day also marks the beginning of a journey—one on which students develop the knowledge, skills, confidence, and self-determination needed to pursue their goals, including higher education if they choose.

This issue highlights a vision for students with disabilities in higher education shared by educators, families, advocates, and students who are building, participating in, and benefiting from inclusive college programs. Across California, innovative programs are already helping students with disabilities access meaningful college experiences. At the same time, our state is intentionally expanding opportunities and strengthening systems to ensure that more students can belong, learn, and thrive in higher education environments (page 6).

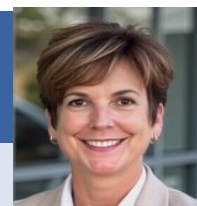
Several articles showcase inclusive programs at colleges and universities throughout California, including San Dieguito's collaboration with COAST Academy, Redwood SEED Scholars at UC Davis, Pathway at UCLA, and Taft College's Transition to Independent Living program. These partnerships demonstrate what is possible when school districts, institutions of higher education, and community organizations work together to expand opportunities and support successful outcomes for students with disabilities (pages 3 and 14).

This issue also explores the broader efforts underway across California to ensure that every student has access to high-quality instruction, rigorous academic standards, and meaningful pathways to a diploma. These foundational elements are critical in preparing students for college, careers, and independent adulthood (page 9).

At the center of this work is the Individualized Education Program (IEP)—a personalized plan designed to support each student's access to the high-quality curriculum and opportunities available to all students. For many students, the IEP also serves as a roadmap toward future educational and career goals, including college. The High Quality IEPs Project continues to provide valuable resources and strategies that help teams create more meaningful, student-centered IEPs that elevate both student and family voices (page 13).

We are also honored to feature the perspectives of students and families whose experiences bring this work to life. Ms. Tami Ferreira, a graduate of the UCLA Pathway Program, shares how her educational journey helped her launch her own accessible yoga business. Tami and her mother, Ana-Paula, offer powerful reflections on the impact of inclusive postsecondary opportunities (pages 16 and 17). Helena Donato-Sapp, a high school student and member of the Advisory Commission on Special Education, also shares her perspective as she prepares for the college application process and considers the opportunities ahead (page 8).

In addition, I am pleased to introduce the California Department of



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Letter cont'd

Education, Special Education Division's new Constituent Support Services Office. This office was established to strengthen communication, provide timely information, and help families and partners access resources that support students with disabilities. We are committed to ensuring that families and educational partners have a trusted point of connection as they navigate California's special education system (page 19).

The stories and programs featured in this issue remind us of what is possible when we hold high expectations, remove barriers, and work together in partnership. Students with disabilities are achieving extraordinary things every day. As opportunities continue to grow across California, so too does our collective responsibility to ensure that every student has access to the supports, experiences, and pathways that will help them realize their aspirations. Whether their goals include college, career, independent living, or all of the above, our responsibility is to ensure that every student has the opportunity, support, and belief necessary to thrive and lead a self-determined life.

That commitment is reflected in the 2026–27 California State Budget, which includes an additional \$25 million in one-time funding for the Inclusive College Technical Assistance Center. This investment will strengthen partnerships among local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, regional centers, and other partners to expand inclusive post-secondary opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. By supporting technical assistance, capacity building, and sustainable inclusive college pathways, this funding helps prepare students for competitive integrated employment, independent living, and meaningful participation in their communities. Together with the budget's broader investments in special education, it further advances our shared vision that every student flourishes in inclusive, equitable learning environments and is prepared for a purposeful adulthood. ■

A Vision for Higher Education for All

Dreaming Big

Many students with disabilities dream about going to college. Out of their struggles to make their dream a reality, these students, along with their family members and educators, are articulating a vision for what ideally would be in place to make a full college experience possible.

Not surprisingly, the vision starts with preparation in early childhood.

Creating a Vision

Jone Duggan is a retired special education teacher who now provides mentoring and consulting services to students and young adults with disabilities in Mendocino County. She insists on the importance of family members planting the idea of higher education early, not just with the child but with everyone who supports the child—service providers, school administrators, teachers, other caregivers. In this way, students receive a consistent message about what is possible.

Jessica Broutt is the senior manager of Pathway at UCLA, a program for students who have an intellectual or developmental disability. She and Duggan both urge students and families to start preparing early by focusing specifically on independence and self-advocacy and practicing those skills as early as it's practical.

Broutt says families can begin with small, age-appropriate tasks such as supporting students to make their own breakfast, set their own alarms, keep their own calendars, and make their own appointments. These concrete steps all help to prepare students for independent living. And since these tasks are done at home, risks can be taken with back-up in place. "Children should be given the opportunity to grow out of supports without fear of abandonment," says Megan Romero, director of the Taft College Transition to Independent Living (TIL) Program.

People with disabilities, however, are sometimes held back from these opportunities because they are not given the dignity of risk, says Beth Foraker, program director at Redwood SEED (Supported Education to Elevate Diversity) Scholars Program at UC Davis. Allowing for that risk, she says, is essential for learning how to thrive.

Offering Choices

Too often, Duggan says, families see their children with disabilities as having limited choices after high school: somewhere between finding paid employment or collecting social security benefits. Duggan encourages families to give their students a couple of years to experience college, if that's possible, and allow them to make mistakes and learn from them. Those college years—or other similar experiences of independence—communicate an important message, she says: "I believe you, I trust you, and we're going to take a chance together."

When Foraker and her colleagues developed Redwood SEEDs, they envisioned students living in dorms for the first two years with support from a mentor. Students would then transition to living in an apartment without onsite support. Parents did worry, Foraker says, but she was confident that the students would benefit. And they have. She acknowledges that independence can be difficult and messy. “But it’s also by far where the most learning happens.”

Changing Systems

Moira Allbritten is a parent of five children with disabilities and a program specialist with Exceptional Families Resource Center. For her, an ideal college landscape addresses small, systemic issues.

“I’m always feeling like I’m in tension with the system,” she says, “because we need to have the textbook on time. . . or we get preregistration, but if we don’t get the money in the account, we lose our registration.” These kinds of looming setbacks leave her feeling “like we’re out of sync with what’s required.” Her son, who has autism and epilepsy, takes classes at a local community college. He has never had everything he needed at the time his classes began, Allbritten says, so he is regularly starting from a position of deficit.

Allbritten’s challenge with practical issues points to other barriers for students with disabilities that many college programs are doing their best to address. Instructors in higher education often don’t have training in how to adapt or make flexible their curriculum; some colleges don’t have the technology that students with certain disabilities require for optimal learning, and others have limited social-emotional supports that

are geared toward students with disabilities.¹

Allbritten emphasizes the importance of this emotional support piece in general and of a support person in particular for students with disabilities in college. That access has been limited, in Allbritten’s experience, and students must match the availability of support with the courses they want to take, which also are limited. As a result, students with disabilities can be left with complicated scheduling challenges.

“It comes to these very pedestrian kinds of things, like schedules and money,” Allbritten says. “We haven’t even gotten in the classroom to learn, and we’re still trying to do the logistics to just be there.” In her vision, college systems would create seamless processes for students with disabilities so that by the time school starts, they would be looking forward to the experience and not overwhelmed with anxiety.

These challenges point back to the importance of developing the self-advocacy skills that everyone needs. California’s public colleges have a disability support services (DSS) office on campus with services that students with disabilities are entitled to access. The offices provide day program services, education services, a work services program, supported employment, work activity programs, supported living services, independent living supports, in-home supportive services, and transition services, among others.

And then there is that finely nuanced issue of identity. Research shows that fewer than a third of students who enroll in postsecondary education programs “disclose their disabilities to their

colleges, and thus may not receive the types of supports they received in the K-12 system,” according to research done by Lynn Newman.² The more postsecondary programs make it possible for students with disabilities to enroll and succeed, the less inclined students will be to hide their disability.

Creating Options

Some inclusive college programs have been able to remove the kinds of challenges that Allbritten’s family experienced. These places are contributing to the vision of what an ideal college experience can look like for students with disabilities. In addition to Redwood SEEDs, there is UCLA’s Pathway. According to Broutt, students work on everything including “executive functioning and time management [and] the different relationships you might have as an adult—the personal, the professional, the romantic.” Students receive ongoing support from advisors and coaches. Residential students typically live in a two-bedroom apartment with three other students in a secure building. Independent living coaches from Level Up Solutions provide overnight support, as well as help with cooking, cleaning, personal hygiene, and roommate disputes. These coaches, funded through the area regional center, also arrange for recreational programming for students who, for example, want to attend football games or take an outing to a nearby city. Broutt says Pathway students become “True Bruins,” in reference to UCLA’s bear mascot, and, more importantly, in reference to the program’s commitment to inclusivity and community. “After our program,” she says, students “feel comfortable going out into the world, living independently, pursuing careers and

1 See “A Systematic Review of Challenges Faced by Students with Disabilities in Higher Education,” at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12234507/>

2 “Factors Associated with Postsecondary Success for Students with Disabilities.” Find this article at <https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/awards/factors-associated-postsecondary-success-students-disabilities>

their interests, and continuing to keep up the friendships and relationships they've made in college."

Taft College, a community college in California's Central Valley, also has a postsecondary residential Transition to Independent Living (TIL) program. Students graduate after two years with an independent living certificate. Some then transition to a four-year program. Funding, including residential expenses, is provided by their regional center. TIL emphasizes employment skills, and all students work in paid internships for six hours a week. TIL student workers can be found in the cafeteria, bookstore, recreation center, and a restaurant in town.

Dispelling Old Beliefs

Staff at Taft's TIL program also encourage students to overcome any perception that their disability will prevent them from being successful, says Romero. She had students last year whose response to a challenge was, "Nope. I'm not gonna do that. I have autism. I can't do that." She tries to find a way to make each task manageable. "How about we just try," she tells them, "see what happens, and we'll go from there."

"I would love to see students trying to do things that they have dreamed for themselves," Romero says, "and if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out." Students with disabilities may not follow the traditional way, it might take longer, she says, and expectations may need to be adjusted. But her vision is for them to see past their disability and know that they can achieve much.

"I have to be very mindful," she says, "and I remind the team, too, not to impose our own beliefs and thoughts on how things should be done for the student. Let them take the lead. You guide and give options."

The option simply to try again can make risk-taking more

manageable. Duggan started her program with four students with disabilities taking a physical education class at a nearby junior college. At that time, students were allowed to repeat a class, which was helpful for those who needed more time to acclimate.

Responding to Student Interests

While students at UCLA's Pathway attend core courses designed to build executive functioning and social support, they also take courses through UCLA extension. Broutt says that currently popular courses include early childhood education, cybersecurity, acting, screenwriting, and real estate. Pathway students can also audit courses at the main UCLA campus. They are paired with UCLA undergraduates who act as mentors and tutors, resulting in relationships that support students' sense of belonging. They attend sports games and join campus clubs and organizations.

Romero says that a lot of Taft's TIL students have shown an interest in learning to drive, so the program helps them prepare for permit testing. All TIL students meet with Taft's Disability Support Programs and Services (DSPS) office to discuss their interests and goals and identify the certificate or degree track they want to pursue. In response, and in partnership with the college, TIL now offers a food handler certificate program taught in a demonstration kitchen where students learn cooking skills, safety, and cashiering. On a different track, one student with a disability created a video gaming club that meets on campus.

Finding Champions

When they applied for Redwood SEED funding in 2020, Foraker and her colleagues decided to dream big. "We wanted four years. We wanted inclusive living. We wanted our students to be full members of [the] campus. . . to earn UC Davis credit. We wanted

them to participate in any club or organization or faith community or student body," she says. They wanted customized employment opportunities that matched their students, and lots of social opportunities.

Support from university leadership was vital to this vision coming true. There were, says Foraker, "champions all around who, once they see the opportunity, step in and use their expertise to make the opportunities happen."

Although none came from Davis originally, six out of eight initial graduates from Redwood SEED Scholars have decided to stay in the city, and four of them plan to share an apartment together. They love Davis, says Foraker, and they feel they are valuable members of the community.

All students, including those with disabilities, deserve an opportunity to attend college if that is their choice. More and more students with disabilities—along with their family members and educators—are starting to dream about college. Some have been able to take advantage of the programs that exist. More programs are needed. But by building on what has been learned and done so far, institutions of higher education have a ready roadmap for how to create campuses that are geared toward educational success for students with disabilities. ■

Resources

- Level Up Solutions: <http://www.levelupsolutions.org>
- Redwood SEED Scholars: <https://redwoodseed.ucdavis.edu>
- Taft TIL: <https://www.taftcollege.edu/o/til/page/transition-to-independent-living-til-program>
- UCLA Pathway program: <https://www.uclaextension.edu/pathway>

California's Inclusive College Landscape

The terms Inclusive College Programs (ICPs), or Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE), refer to higher education opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities who attend college alongside peers with and without disabilities. These programs are housed within colleges and universities, and they are specifically designed to support students who may not otherwise have access to higher education due to traditional admissions requirements or lack of support. There is currently a strong movement in California to expand inclusive colleges.

Making Space

California now has more than twenty inclusive college programs. These include two-year and four-year public and private schools. The programs are located throughout California. They are on University of California campuses and include the Pathway program at the University of California Los Angeles and the Redwood SEED Scholars program at the University of California Davis.

Programs can be found on California State University campuses as well. These include the Wayfinders program at Fresno State and the Spartan Program at San Jose State. Some of California's community college campuses also provide inclusive college programs, such as Taft College's Transition to Independent Living Program and the LIFE Program at Sierra College. These IPSE programs are designed so that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities can attend college, take part in authentic college experiences,

enroll in academic courses, join clubs and social activities, and live in dorms and apartments. Students don't just visit the campus as guests; they belong. All of the programs have one thing in common—they are intended to provide education, build independence, and develop the students' aspirations to enter the competitive workforce.

Federal Legislation

Over the past two decades, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education



Act (IDEA) in 2004 has shifted transition planning toward a more outcomes-oriented process focused on postschool success, including postsecondary education, vocational preparation, and integrated employment. This momentum led to the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, which supported establishment of the Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Programs (CTPs) and funding for Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID). This funding provides federal grants to model demonstration projects and created a national coordinating center, Think College, to support

the expansion of inclusive higher education nationwide. These key legislative acts have strengthened support for inclusive higher education initiatives leading to significant growth in programs across California and the United States.

Getting There

The journey to higher education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities is undergoing an historic transformation. In California and nationally, the idea of going to college is no longer just a dream; it is a tangible reality for students with disabilities that is fueled by innovative programs and a growing commitment to inclusive college programs. IPSE programs represent this shift from historically segregated, low-expectation pathways for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, toward fully participatory higher education.

Program Models

In California, many of the earliest IPSE programs developed independently. As a result, these programs vary widely in their structure, philosophy, and level of support. This high degree of variability has resulted in several different program models across colleges and universities.

Some programs provide intense support while others do not. Some use outside services while others primarily use campus resources. Some are fully inclusive; others offer traditional specialized classes. Whatever the model, these programs taken together reflect California's evolving landscape of inclusive higher education and the ongoing effort to balance individualized support with authentic inclusion and

self-determination.

While the number of students accepted into each program differs by location, the programs generally use a small-scale approach with a limited number of students enrolled in each cohort. This ensures that students receive person-centered plans and the individualized support they need.

At least seven California IPSE programs have also become certified through Federal Student Aid as a Comprehensive Transition Postsecondary (CTP) Program. This is transformative because it allows students with intellectual disabilities to access federal financial aid such as Pell Grants and Work-Study, even if they do not have a standard high school diploma or are not in pursuit of a traditional degree. Additionally, in 2025, six California colleges or consortia—CSU East Bay, CSU Northridge, CSU San Jose, CSU San Marcos, Sierra College, and Stanford University—received a TPSID federal grant to develop or expand their programs.

State Legislation

The California Budget Act of 2024 and Assembly Bill 447 established the California Center for Inclusive College (CCIC) to serve as California's State Technical Assistance Center for inclusive colleges. The mission of CCIC is to promote equitable access, participation, inclusion, and belonging for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through technical assistance and collaboration, CCIC supports the development and expansion of ICPs across California to empower these students to fully participate in academics, campus life, independent living, and meaningful employment opportunities.

CCIC works in partnership



with colleges, universities, Think College, regional centers, the Department of Rehabilitation, and school districts to build and expand quality ICP programs, with a focus on paving the way for access. The center is jointly led by the Los Angeles County Office of Education and Sacramento County Office of Education. Information about CCIC is available at www.cainclusivecolleges.org.

Another essential function of the CCIC is to build awareness of inclusive colleges in California. Educators and family members have a powerful influence on supporting student access to postsecondary options. As IEP teams develop individualized transition plans connected to individualized education plans, they all should be considering inclusive college options. As IEP and transition goals focus on education, career, employment, community engagement, and independence, these goals can align with inclusive college opportunities.

During 2025, a CCIC team interacted with students and staff at some of California's successful ICP programs, gathering information about promising practices such as the use of Universal Design for Learning and prioritizing competitive integrated employment. This collaboration brought to the forefront a few of the challenges facing ICPs, such as complex funding streams, low

expectations from faculty and/or peer mentors, and insufficient awareness of these programs within our prekindergarten through twelfth grade campuses. The CCIC is currently working to expand promising practices and to identify innovative ways to overcome the barriers confronting ICPs.

Wide-ranging Benefits

Research has shown that participation in inclusive postsecondary education programs increases opportunities for competitive integrated employment, self-determination, social inclusion, and overall quality of life for students with disabilities, including a reduction in long-term reliance on state services¹. These outcomes make efforts to expand IPSE programs within California an equity priority and an economic imperative.

There is no question that inclusive post-secondary programs offer an important pathway for promoting equitable access to higher education and meaningful adult outcomes. The availability of these programs does something even more important. When students with intellectual disabilities walk across the graduation stage with their peers, it isn't just a ceremony; it is proof that they are valued, contributing members of a society that believes they are capable of learning, growing, and thriving. ■

1 See, for example, "Implications of inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs) on quality of life for young adults with intellectual disabilities" at <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1178&context=honors202029>

My Transition to High School Senior and Beyond

By Helena Donato-Sapp, Global and National Award-Winning Advocate, Educator, Creative Writer, and Keynote Speaker

It was during the first IEP meeting of my junior year in high school that my IEP team brought up the topic of transitioning. Transitioning is a required part of an IEP that prepares disabled students for life after high school. The main thing they addressed in this transition meeting was that, at the age of 18, I would be solely responsible for my learning needs as an adult neurodivergent person. I have been a strong and fierce advocate all of my school life, and nobody in the room was really concerned about my ability to self-advocate. I felt confident about that, but there were other anxieties that we discussed.

I do have some fears about moving towards college. For one, because I have four non-ap-parent learning disabilities, I began opting out of any standardized testing at the end of third grade.

Standardized tests in my school were given to all students in the exact same way whether you were neurodiverse or neurotypical, and there were no accommodations offered in taking them. The tests relied heavily on memorization and rapid processing, which are exactly two of my four learning disabilities. I also felt a negative psychological impact because the ones I had taken in the past made me feel so badly about myself and my academic abilities. Those tests will never measure my abilities.

On top of that, I have severe dyscalculia—a math disorder—and I was denied a math education for most of my schooling experience. A school I attended as a ninth grader was especially

hostile towards me as a disabled student, and I received no math instruction or credit that year. That means that when I graduate I will be one math class short of meeting my A-G requirements. My ninth grade school did not support those of us with disabilities. They believed in the erroneous “myth of independence” and preached that “good” students didn’t need help and could figure out things inde-



pendently. My parents and I advocated hard for accommodations all year long, but all it did was put us into serious conflict with a system that did not support neurodiverse students. I left that school for my academic and psychological well-being, and it was the best decision I ever made.

I also have not taken any AP classes. I wonder how all of this will impact my college admissions.

One thing I am very committed to is that I want to attend a university that has an open curriculum. Open curriculum is an academic model with few or no required core classes and it would allow me to design my own educational path. Prominent colleges and universities that have open curriculum are Brown Univer-

sity, Amherst College, Grinnell College, Hamilton College, and Smith College; these are target institutions for me. I’m interested in getting a degree in critical disability studies or political science with a minor in film and TV. An open curriculum would allow me to self-direct and, to be honest, that would mean no more math classes for me! It would also allow me to tailor my major to my interests and focus on depth.

I have a great IEP team and fantastic, supportive parents, and I am anxious about my ability to negotiate life without them. I am a fierce self-advocate so I think I can negotiate my learning needs at the university just fine. But if I am honest, I have some anxiousness around doing my own banking, laundry, scheduling, and negotiating life with an anonymous roommate. These are things I think about as I start my senior year and the college application process.

I trust myself. And my current IEP team more than prepared me with tools for success. I can still phone my parents for guidance. There is a reason, though, that this is called transitioning because I am transitioning into adulthood. For disabled students, there is fear around moving toward “adulthood” for reasons I’ve written about here. But I think I am situated better to succeed because I am a disabled student. I’ve had supports on my school journey, and the adults around me discussed every step along the way so that I deeply understood and, consequently, I have built strong capacities to guide myself to success. ■

Building the Foundation: High-Quality Learning and a Pathway to a Diploma

When shaping the environment of higher education to ensure success for students with disabilities, it is tempting to jump straight to college campuses, dual-enrollment pathways, and transition planning. But the foundation for every student's postsecondary success is built much earlier, in prekindergarten-through-twelfth-grade classrooms that build cultures of belonging, provide rigorous instruction, and create high expectations.

Access Begins with Belief

At the heart of inclusive education is a deceptively simple principle: presume competence. Drawn from the work of disability rights advocates and researchers, presuming competence means treating every student as a capable learner with the potential to grow, communicate, and contribute, often before there is evidence. It means designing learning environments around what a student can do, rather than organizing environments around a diagnosis or a label.

This is not unfounded optimism. Research consistently demonstrates that low expectations function as a ceiling and perpetuate deficits.

When educators, systems, and families operate from a deficit framework, students receive watered-down curricula, reduced access to grade-level content, and fewer opportunities to demonstrate what they know. Presuming competence disrupts that pattern by changing the question. "Is this student ready for grade-level instruction?" becomes "How do we make grade-level instruction

accessible to this student?" That change is foundational to everything that follows.

Tier 1 Instruction: The Nonnegotiable Starting Point

One of the most persistent myths about special education is that students with disabilities need something fundamentally different before they can access the general curriculum. But high-quality instruction for all students—Tier 1 core instruction—



delivered to every student regardless of the educational setting can dispel that myth.

When Tier 1 is strong, it benefits all learners. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles—embedded scaffolds, multiple means of representation and engagement, clear learning objectives, and flexible options for demonstrating knowledge—are not special education accommodations. They are hallmarks of excellent teaching. When these practices are present from the start, fewer students require intensive intervention later, and more students move through the grades with the skills and confidence they need to pursue higher education and career pathways.

For students with IEPs, access to Tier 1 instruction in the least restrictive environment is not a programmatic nicety; it is a legal and moral imperative. The classroom is where belonging happens. Separate does not prepare students for integrated community life.

Literacy: The Gateway to Every Other Door

Among all the skills students develop from prekindergarten through twelfth grade, literacy is perhaps the most consequential. The ability to read, write, and communicate with independence is not just an academic skill; it is the gateway to self-advocacy, lifelong learning, and participation in higher education and community life. Access to explicit, evidence-based, quality literacy instruction is essential for all students, regardless of their disability.

College programs across California are reporting that a significant number of incoming students, with or without disabilities, require either basic literacy instruction or literacy remediation. Beth Foraker, at the UC Davis Redwood SEED Scholars program, has witnessed this firsthand.

"When students come to us, we have found that many have intense shame because of thirteen years of being in a school system that could not help them read. They blame themselves and want to shy away from anything to do with reading. We accept them where they are and move them forward in their literacy by using all the tools: targeted instruction, assistive technology, numerous

apps, front-loading information and daily practice in reading and writing ... The simple truth is that once we meet them where they are and give them the right tools, they have proven that they are able to learn at high levels. They are excited to be able to access college classes and don't take that opportunity for granted. They are on time, engaged, serious college students hungry for content knowledge."

Foraker's observation points to something the research has long affirmed: with the right instruction, delivered with fidelity and high expectations, students with disabilities are capable of far more than they sometimes demonstrate.

The science of reading is clear, and it applies to all students. Structured literacy approaches, phonemic awareness, explicit decoding instruction, vocabulary development, and fluency practice belong in every student's educational experience. When these practices are embedded into Tier 1 instruction from the earliest grades, and when they are sustained with intentional support through secondary school, students with disabilities arrive at adulthood as more capable, more confident, and more independent learners.

California's literacy initiative is addressing this challenge. The state promotes evidence-based instruction in foundational literacy skills—print concepts, phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency—alongside oral language development, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, speaking, and listening skills. (For more information and resources, go to <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cl/>).

High-Leverage Practices: A Common Language for Quality

The additional good news is

that California's educators are increasingly relying on a shared framework for instructional excellence: the High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) developed through a collaboration between the Council for Exceptional Children and the CEEDAR Center. These 22 practices represent the research-based, classroom-tested strategies that matter most for students with disabilities.

HLPs address the full arc of effective instruction: building positive and productive learning environments, assessing student learning, delivering instruction, and collaborating with colleagues and families. They give special educators and general educators a common language and a shared set of tools that can be successfully integrated into quality Tier I instruction. When an education specialist and a content teacher both understand how to use flexible grouping, explicit instruction, and scaffolded support, their collaboration becomes more coherent, and their students benefit.

Critically, HLPs are not a checklist to be completed and filed. They are daily practices that must be intentionally developed, coached, and refined within each lesson. That development requires sustained investment.

Rigor in Teacher Preparation and Professional Learning

California's educator workforce is increasingly diverse in both background and credentialing pathways. But preparation quality remains uneven, and ongoing professional learning is often fragmented. To take root, inclusive practices must be built into the structures of how educators learn, not layered on as a single class in their preparation curriculum or a one-time training at a school district.

Teacher preparation programs play a critical role in ensuring that educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs of all learners, including students with disabilities. As inclusive education expands across schools and higher education settings, teachers must develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide instruction with varying supports to meet the needs of all students. Effective preparation programs need to include coursework, field experiences, and collaborative practices that emphasize inclusive teaching strategies, UDL, and disability awareness to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed and feel a sense of academic and social belonging.

Effective professional development in inclusive education is sustained, job-embedded, and collaborative. It includes co-planning and co-teaching partnerships where general and special educators share responsibility for all students. It includes coaching cycles focused on HLPs and UDL, and it also plans for education specialists/special education teachers and content teachers to observe each other, debrief, and grow.

Families as Essential Partners

No school-based strategy succeeds without the partnership of families. For students with disabilities, families are often the most consistent advocates. They hold knowledge about their children that no assessment can fully capture, and they are critical partners in assuming competence and setting meaningful, ambitious goals from the time their children are small.

Yet families are often brought to the IEP table as recipients of information rather than co-constructors of a vision. Genuine family partnership means proactive, trans-

parent communication throughout the year. It means sharing what Tier 1 instruction looks like and why their child belongs in it. It requires explaining the HLPs being used and how families can reinforce those practices at home. Creating space for families to be truly equitable members of the IEP team allows them to ask hard questions and to push back—and for teams to treat that pushback as valuable information.

When families and educators are genuinely aligned around high expectations and a shared commitment to belonging, students thrive.

The Diploma as a Starting Point, Not a Ceiling

Every student in California, including every student with a disability, has a right to a pathway to a high school diploma that reflects genuine, standards-based learning and preparation. The diploma is not the destination—it is the door to a self-determined future.

The work of building the pathway to a diploma begins the moment a child enters a preschool. It is built through presumed competence, access to strong Tier 1 instruction, HLP-aligned teaching, ongoing educator learning, and honest and trusting partnerships with families. When these elements are in place, students with disabilities do not just survive school. They are ready for what comes next, armed with the skills they need to go to college, seek employment, and participate in community life.

That readiness, cultivated across thirteen or more years of schooling, is what can make higher education an attainable reality rather than a distant aspiration. ■

For more information on High-Leverage Practices, visit the Council for Exceptional Children at <https://highleveragepractices.org>

Standards: The Same High Bar

When California adopted its academic standards for kindergarten through twelfth-grade education, it made a promise to provide every student access to grade-level standards. That promise belongs to students with disabilities as much as to students without disabilities.

It can be easy to assume that students who receive special education support and services are working toward different goals, in a different system, measured by different expectations than those that guide their nondisabled peers. Sometimes that assumption shows up in how classrooms are organized, how Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are written, or how students are talked about. But federal and state laws are clear that students with disabilities have the right to access the same general curriculum as their peers. The IEP is the legal tool designed to make that access real and meaningful for each student. Each student's IEP is a personalized roadmap into the same curriculum every other student is expected to learn.

Access to the same standards, however, does not mean that every student learns the same content in the same way. It means that all students are working toward grade-level academic goals with whatever supports, accommodations, and services their IEP specifies. For some students, access may mean extended time or assistive technology; for others, it may mean modified instructional

materials, intensive intervention, or additional time with a specialist. What it does not mean is replacing grade-level content with something lower or easier without an explicit, legal reason.

For families, this insistence on standards with access matters in a practical sense. When they review their child's IEP, a family that understands this requirement can ask if the annual goals reflect what California expects students to learn at grade level. They can ask if their child is receiving instruction in the general curriculum with the needed supports and services to access it. These are not technical questions—they are reasonable questions for any IEP meeting.

For practitioners and school leaders, California's work on high-quality IEPs reflects this same understanding. A high-quality IEP is one that not only meets procedural requirements; it is one that is grounded in accurate data, built around ambitious goals, aligned to grade-level standards, and designed to move students forward in the curriculum they are entitled to access.

Access to the state standards is not the ceiling. It is the floor. Every student in California deserves an education that starts from that premise and builds from there. ■

For more information on High Quality IEPs, see story on page 13 and their website at <https://highqualityieps.net>

Diploma Equity: California's Alternative Pathway

A high school diploma is both a symbolic rite of passage and one of the most meaningful credentials a student can earn. It can open doors to college, employment, and greater independence. For too long, a high school diploma was out of reach for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities—not because of what students were capable of, but because the system offered only one pathway to graduation for a majority of these students, and that pathway culminated in a certificate of completion instead of a diploma.

Beginning in the 2022–23 school year, California changed that. With the enactment of Education Code sections 51225.31 and 51225.32, the state created an alternative pathway to a high school diploma for eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities. The result of this change is not a modified diploma or a certificate of completion; it is a diploma of graduation, earned through a process that reflects how these students learn and demonstrates what they know. Students who earn a diploma through this pathway have met California's graduation requirements through alternate means determined by their IEP team.

Families may not have been told that this pathway was a possibility for their children. It is worth understanding what it is, who it is for, and what it means for a student's future.

Who Is Eligible?

When a student is slated to take the California Alternate Assessment, known as the CAA, that student is eligible for this new diploma of graduation. The CAA is taken by students whose IEP teams have determined that the standard statewide assessment

is not appropriate for them, even with accommodations. These are students with significant cognitive disabilities whose instruction is based on alternate achievement standards that are aligned to California's academic content standards. The IEP team, using guidance from the California Department of Education, makes the eligibility determination. This is a careful, consequential decision, and IEP teams can use the CDE's Alternate Assessment IEP Team Guidance when working through it.

The New Pathway

Rather than meeting graduation requirements through traditional coursework and assessments, students who are eligible for a diploma of graduation demonstrate completion through alternate means and in accordance with their IEP.

Earning a diploma through this pathway does not necessarily end a student's right to special education services. California and federal law are clear that awarding this diploma does not change or terminate a local education agency's (LEA's) obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to an eligible student who wishes to continue to receive services. Students who earn this diploma continue to be entitled to services until age 22 or until they otherwise age out of eligibility. This is one of the most important and most commonly misunderstood aspects of the law. Families, school teams, and regional centers should all be aware of this provision.

Planning After High School

Because this new diploma is a genuine diploma, students who earn it through this pathway may have postsecondary options that were not previously available to

them, such as inclusive postsecondary education programs and some competitive employment pathways. These opportunities are important for IEP teams to incorporate into a student's general program at the earliest possible time, and to include in the student's transition plans.

Accessing this Pathway: Tips for Families

If their child is eligible for the California Alternate Assessment, or if they have been told that the standard diploma pathway is not a realistic option for their child, families have every reason to ask the IEP team whether the alternative pathway applies. Families can ask, "How can my child access this pathway? What courses and coursework would they need to demonstrate completion of graduation requirements and what courses will they take each year in order to meet them?" There is currently no requirement that LEAs proactively tell families about this pathway. LEAs are required to offer it to eligible students, however, when families ask.

Committing to Students

California made a significant commitment when this law was enacted, and the work of implementation is ongoing. What is already true is that students who have spent years learning alongside their peers, demonstrating knowledge in the ways available to them, and building skills that matter for adult life now have a pathway to a diploma that reflects what they have accomplished. The work now, for schools and families, is to make sure every eligible student actually has the opportunity to earn it. ■

High-Quality IEPs and Self-Determination

As the backbone of special education, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) can serve as a roadmap to help students prepare for meaningful postsecondary outcomes. To be prepared for a variety of postsecondary outcomes, including college, students need to meaningfully participate in their IEP

High Quality IEPs
STUDENT EDITION
BEFORE the IEP

Building on My Strengths

Every student is unique and has their own strengths. It's important to know your strengths so you can grow and become more independent.

Why is this important?
No matter your age, your education team needs to know about you as a learner: how you learn best. This is your time to voice your opinion on how you can be successful this school year.

How do I do this?
There are four areas to either write down phrases, draw pictures, or dictate to someone who you are as a learner.

My Name: _____ My Grade: _____

Strengths
What do I do well?

Preferences
I learn best by:

I feel most comfortable working:

- ☐ on my own
- ☐ with a partner
- ☐ in a group

It helps me when my teacher...

info@highqualityieps.net | highqualityieps.net

team so that the IEP can be designed to support their future goals. To this end, the High Quality IEPs Project (HQ IEPs) has developed user-friendly resources that help educators, students, and families strengthen the IEP process while building the skills students need to successfully navigate life beyond high school.

Part of the Statewide System of Support, HQ IEPs is a grant-funded initiative supported by the California Department of Education and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. Heather DiFede, the project's executive director, says the work "is grounded in student-centered, strengths-based IEP development. It's really about building these

skills throughout the student's educational career."

Building Participation

A key component of this work is helping students develop self-determination. While federal and state requirements call for students to be invited to their IEP meetings during transition planning, meaningful participation does not begin when a student turns 16. Rather, it is a skill that develops over time through intentional opportunities to build awareness, make choices, express preferences, advocate for needs, and participate in decision-making.

As DiFede explains, "Meaningful participation doesn't happen automatically. Students need opportunities to develop the skills, confidence, and understanding necessary to actively engage in their educational journey."

For this reason, HQ IEPs encourages educators to begin fostering self-determination early and often. Students of all ages can participate in aspects of their IEP development and educational planning when provided with appropriate supports and opportunities. Building these skills throughout a student's educational experience creates a stronger foundation for successful transition planning and postsecondary outcomes.

ASCEND Framework

Through collaboration with California educators, engagement with national research, and partnerships across the Statewide System of Support, HQ IEPs identified a need for practical tools that help educators intentionally

teach and reinforce self-determination skills. Educators shared that they needed common language and concrete strategies to help students develop these critical competencies.

The result is ASCEND, a framework designed to support the development of self-determination through six interconnected skill areas: Awareness, Self-Advocacy, Confidence, Expression, Navigation, and Determination. Rather than treating self-determination as a separate initiative, ASCEND helps educators recognize opportunities to embed these skills into everyday instruction and classroom interactions—and into the IEP process itself.

By helping students build these skills over time, educators can create pathways for students to become active participants in their education, meaningful contributors



to their IEP teams, and confident planners of their own futures. Ultimately, self-determination is not just about preparing students for an IEP meeting—it is about preparing them for life beyond school. ■

To access free resources from the High Quality IEPs project, visit <https://highqualityieps.net>.

San Dieguito Helps Students Map Postsecondary Transitions

Some students with disabilities finish four years of high school with a Certificate of Completion rather than a traditional diploma. Those with the most significant disabilities may have followed an Alternative Pathway to a Diploma. Regardless of the kind of diploma these students have earned, they are ready for the transition to post-secondary education.

The San Dieguito Union High School District is ready, too.

Both IDEA and the State of California require postsecondary transition planning by age 16. But San Dieguito, in northern San Diego County, begins creating Individualized Transition Plans when students with disabilities enter eighth grade. “We’re doing interest inventories and age-appropriate assessments, and we’re building on students’ strengths” says Sara Okleshen, a teacher at San Dieguito on special assignment who focuses on inclusion, intervention, and outreach. “We are mapping out their four-year plan, and that’s going to be different for every student.”

That plan may include the Community Opportunities for Adult Students in Transition (COAST) Academy, the district’s highly supportive postsecondary program that combines special education with work and experiences in community-based settings. San Dieguito and MiraCosta Community College have forged a unique partnership that offers these students the chance to experience life on a college campus.

The COAST curriculum focuses on continuing education, employment, independent living, personal development (social and interpersonal skills), and community-based topics, such as mobility and safety. Because

these students qualify under IDEA to receive extra support during post-secondary education up to age 22, they continue to have Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. “So we know what systems and services need to be in place,” says Kellie Maul, coordinator of special education. All lessons and activities are differentiated based on individual student needs.

To begin the transition from high school to COAST, “We start by educating our families,” says Maul. “We offer an overview of the curriculum and take parents on a tour of the school site, where they meet the teachers. Once the families are familiar with the site, the students will go from their high school to spend a day at COAST.”

For students who need extra support during this transition, San Dieguito offers an extended school year program the summer after the students’ senior year.

A typical day at COAST begins with a morning meeting. “Sometimes a student will lead the meeting,” Maul says. “There’s usually a question of the day, and they might talk about how we are feeling today. They go through their schedules and then branch out.” Some will go to a nearby retirement home where they work in food service or to one of the classes that the district supports at MiraCosta. Some will stay on campus and work on their IEP goals, and some have other jobs in the community. Throughout the day, students are learning—and practicing—self-expression, self-advocacy, and self-confidence.

“We have thirteen business partnerships for our adult transition program,” Maul says. These partnerships offer employment

opportunities at such sites as restaurants, grocery stores, gardens, a movie theater, and a library. “We also have opportunities at COAST for students who might not be ready to go out into the workforce and are working on pre-employment transition skills,” says Okleshen.

San Dieguito employs four vocational developers, three based at district high schools and one at COAST. “They go out and find local jobs in the community,” Okleshen says, “and our instructional assistants act as job coaches,” offering help with such tasks as writing resumes and cover letters and asking for letters of recommendation.

The students’ training and jobs are supported by a WorkAbility grant and by the Transition Partnership Program (TPP). Most of San Dieguito’s students with disabilities are supported through WorkAbility, a state-funded program designed to help students develop the skills that lead to gainful employment and that provides the opportunity for actual work experience, both paid and unpaid. TPP is a collaboration between the school district and the California Department of Rehabilitation designed to assist students with the transition from school to work.

“For most of our COAST students we are looking at vocational pathways,” says Maul. “But if college is important to a student, we investigate how we can make that happen. We need to assess ability, and then ... how do we take a dream and make it into something that is achievable for them.”

Okleshen says that most students who are eligible for COAST do choose to attend. And

there are students from four private high schools in the area “who come back into our district strictly for our adult transition program because it’s really good.” Students enrolled in COAST have a variety of disabilities, including significant cognitive impairment, she says. “We have students in wheelchairs; we have students who require feeding support. And we may have students who did take a mix of traditional high school courses but really needed to focus more on vocational skills and chose the certificate of completion route. It’s a wide range.”

Partnership with MiraCosta Community College

“We partner with MiraCosta to offer our students a variety of opportunities,” says Okleshen. “Typically, we provide support for a course every semester. We focus on noncredit courses that align with our students’ schedules and supplement their vocational skills and IEP goals.”

Among the courses that San Dieguito has supported are Basic Academic Skills, Basic Computer Skills, Money Smart, and Effective Life Skills. The district provides transportation to the nearby college campus. The courses, Okleshen says, “are tuition-free and are designed to increase independence and daily living skills.”

The district has a memorandum of understanding with MiraCosta that allows instructional assistants to support the students in the classroom. “That’s helpful both for the students and the instructors because [the instructional assistants] know the students very well,” says Jeff Higginbotham, director of Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at MiraCosta.

For the past four years the district has hosted a fully inclusive College and Career Night on the MiraCosta campus. Along with more than 200 typical four-year colleges, the most recent fair offered 38 resources for postsecondary education and career opportunities for students who will not receive a traditional high school diploma.

MiraCosta’s Higginbotham also makes presentations at the district’s high schools. “When talking to high school students, we discuss credit and noncredit programs, we share information about accommodations, and we describe the differences between high school and college,” he says. “We provide instructions for how to get connected with SAS, and we normalize and encourage students to request accommodations. We are also starting to go to more high schools to speak with the special education staff and teachers.”

In addition, says Okleshen, “We do information sessions for families. We had Jeff and his team talk to them about student accessibility services as well as academic and career pathways.”

Okleshen says that communicating with families is key. “At College and Career Night and during tours of

COAST,” she says, “we give them opportunities where they can be face to face with the resources” that are available. The district also has a special education family resources webpage with college, career, and transition resources.

San Dieguito’s creative collaboration among high schools, families, support programs, and colleges, Okleshen says, offers “an opportunity for every student in the district to find something that is meaningful.” ■

Empowering Futures in Anaheim

The Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD) highlights Career Connections Unlimited, a Work-Based Learning and Work Experience Program. Administered by AUHSD Special Youth Services, this initiative bridges classroom theory and professional practice for qualifying students with disabilities through dedicated local business partnerships. The program is funded by the California Department of Education’s Workability 1 Grant and the California Department of Rehabilitation’s Transition Partnership Program.

The initiative has demonstrated significant impact:

- Last school year, more than 700 students completed daily career skill lessons, and 507 transitioned into competitive work experiences.
- For the upcoming school year, projections show 837 students in classroom instruction and 627 participating in work experience.
- Participants earn minimum wage while completing 58 to 120 hours of service, proving that inclusive excellence is achievable and sustainable.

AUHSD’s success relies on strong community alignment. In May 2026, the district celebrated 30 new business partners alongside representatives from the office of Congressman Lou Carrera and the Anaheim City Council.

A key example is the partnership with Anaheim Public Works, where students receive expert mentorship to perform high-level technical tasks:

- Running vehicle diagnostic tests using computer systems.
- Utilizing specialized tools to disassemble police cars.
- Gaining practical mechanical experience.

These achievements demonstrate the value of inclusive workplaces, equip students with vital professional skills, and prepare them for long-term career success. ■

— *Tina Koffroth, AUHSD program specialist and grant coordinator*

A Mother's Story: A Pathway to Success

Ana-Paula Ferreira has been her daughter's lifelong advocate, cheerleader—and chauffeur.

Now 22 and a graduate of UCLA's Pathway program, Tami Ferreira is a successful yoga teacher and model. But her own pathway to success as a student with disabilities was often one of uncertainty and frustration for her family.

Tami has cerebral palsy and reads and writes at a third-grade level. When she completed high school, she was automatically transitioned from her special education classes into her school district's post-secondary program. "We didn't know that other programs existed," says Ferreira. "No one sat down with our family and discussed the full range of possibilities available to students with disabilities. No one had explained that there were inclusive college programs or that higher education could be a realistic path for her."

Ferreira says she knew her daughter had "talents, dreams, and potential. She always wanted more than what post-secondary education offered. She had a thirst for growth and wanted to be socially and economically viable." But at that time, Ferreira says, "I didn't know how to connect those strengths and dreams to a meaningful adult life for Tami. And I had many questions: What happens after high school? How does a young adult with disabilities build a career? What opportunities exist, and how do families find them?"

What followed, she says, was not a straightforward transition from high school to post-secondary life, but "years of uncertainty, self-advocacy, trial and error, financial sacrifice, and

often a great deal of fear" about what the future might hold for her daughter.

And then came a call from Los Angeles Fashion Week. "They were looking for accessible models," Ferreira says. And when Tami became the first young woman with cerebral palsy to walk a fashion runway, her parents hired a professional modeling coach.



That coach was part of a plan of action. Ferreira designed her own transition plan for Tami. She knew that Tami wanted to be an accessible yoga teacher. Three times a week after her post-secondary classes ended, Ferreira drove Tami from Agoura Hills to Ventura for private yoga instruction. She hired Tami's former adapted physical education teacher to help design accessible yoga sequences for Tami. And because she knew her daughter loved languages, she arranged weekly tutoring sessions with Tami's former French teacher.

All of these commitments, Ferreira says, were designed to showcase Tami's strengths rather than her liabilities.

"Everything was privately funded," she says, "because we simply did not know that programs

such as funding options existed to support these goals." Much of her time was spent driving Tami to lessons, classes, auditions, and therapy sessions.

Media stories about Fashion Week caught the attention of the folks at UCLA's Pathway program. "We got a call from UCLA. We thought it was spam. But they said, 'We think Tami would be great here.' We took a tour, and she loved it. From a molly-coddled high school she was making this vast transition" to a major university.

Pathway "saw that Tami wanted more and opened a lot of doors for her, Ferreira says. "I assumed the likes of college programs for people with disabilities were strictly for those who had not only completed high school but matriculated with high SAT scores like their mainstream typical students. I was so grateful to discover that isn't the case."

Transition programs, Ferreira says, can "help families understand the options, resources, funding pathways, and opportunities that are available so they can make informed decisions and dream big for their sons and daughters.

"If I could offer one piece of advice to other parents, it would be this: don't assume the first path presented to you is the only one," she says. "Ask questions, explore every available opportunity, and never allow a diagnosis to become the ceiling for your child's future. Sometimes the greatest breakthroughs begin because one parent simply refused to stop believing in what was possible and was willing to help turn possibility into reality." ■

A Daughter's Story: Pathway Student to Yoga Instructor

By Tami Ferreira, UCLA graduate and yoga instructor

When I first enrolled in the UCLA Pathway program, I was incredibly excited, but once classes began, I quickly became overwhelmed. UCLA Pathway is a college program for students like myself who identify as neurodiverse. Coming from special education classes in middle school and high school and transitioning into a large university environment felt like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool and being expected to swim without experience.

I live with cerebral palsy and also have visual and cognitive challenges, including limited peripheral vision and difficulty navigating distances. During my first year, I relied on support from an aide who helped me take notes and move around campus. Even finding classrooms sometimes felt intimidating.

Over time, UCLA Pathway helped me become more resilient, independent, and confident. By my second year, I was comfortable navigating both the main UCLA campus and the halls of the Gayley Center, where the UCLA Extension Pathway classes were held. I then enrolled in the UCLA

Yoga Leadership Program while continuing my Pathway studies, the first person with disabilities to do so.

The Yoga Leadership Program was physically and academically demanding. Out of more than 30 students who enrolled, only 14 graduated. Completing the program alongside UCLA Pathway in 2024 became one of the proudest accomplishments of my life.

My UCLA experience inspired me to continue my education, and I later returned for a third year at UCLA Pathway to study in the UCLA Fitness Science Program. By then, UCLA Pathway had already helped me build confidence and resilience in spaces where students with disabilities were not commonly represented.

Pathway also helped me grow socially. Because I was a commuter student and did not live on campus like most of my fellow Pathway students, maintaining friendships was more challenging, but I formed meaningful connections, including a close friendship that continues today. Later, while working as an administrative intern for the Pathway director, I

reviewed incoming student applications and was surprised to see my friend's application as the first application placed on my desk. He is now a second-year Pathway student himself.

Today, I teach accessible yoga through my initiative, Tami's Yoga, and chair yoga classes at UCLA Osher in the UCLA Extension building where much of my own college journey began. I also enjoy fashion and modeling, which helped me grow creatively and personally during college.

After graduating in 2024, I remain connected to UCLA through alumni events and Pathway events such as participation in the UCLA Special Olympics Walkathon and more recently even being a guest speaker in the Pathway Health and Nutrition class to share the health benefits of practicing yoga as a person living with special needs. It is both nostalgic and rewarding to keep my Pathway journey going in the way of these events and guest opportunities. UCLA Pathway changed my life by giving me opportunity, independence, a sense of belonging and I'm proud to shout—Go Bruins! ■



Toolkit Helps Schools Track Students After Graduation

Collecting, entering, and analyzing data is challenging. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Indicator 14, however, requires these tasks from local educational agencies (LEAs)—specifically, data on the postschool outcomes of students with disabilities.

To obtain the information they need, LEAs must contact graduates one year after they leave school. But sometimes people do not understand the value of the information required. For example, how many students go on to college? Are they employed? Where are they living? Are they happy? How do they describe their social life?

Answers to these kinds of questions can help highlight successful programs, direct the improvement of services that exist, and generally serve as a monitor for schools to gauge how well they are doing with their most important charge: preparing students for independence and adult life.

With nearly 80 percent of individuals with disabilities unemployed in this country,¹ and given the incumbent indignities of being dependent, this is one charge that schools struggle to get right.

Chiara Perry is the assistant director of the California Collaborative for Impactful Pathways (CCIP) at Santa Clara County Office of Education, an organization that is helping LEAs both gather and use their Indicator 14 data more effectively. CCIP is a resource within California's Statewide System of Support funded by the Special Education Division.

According to Perry, the Indicator 14 toolkit project began by gathering best practices from special education directors around the state and information from such state partners as WorkAbility and the Department of Rehabilitation to determine what data was being collected and how these agencies were maintaining contact information for students. She and her colleagues then completed a draft toolkit and revised it with feedback from CDE, "using our experience with improvement science," says Anna Marie Villalobos, who also works with CCIP.

While the toolkit is designed to assist LEAs with compliance, Villalobos says that it also pushes "further into analysis of data and then cycles of improvement." It includes equity questions to help schools ensure they are reaching

all of their populations.

A four-session webinar on the toolkit has been recorded and is available on the project website. Matthew Love, a consultant on the project, says the webinars are helping special education directors get in touch with dozens of colleagues—state directors across California who are gathering the same information. Knowing this, he says, helps emphasize the information's importance. Villalobos agrees. When special education directors have the opportunity to share with others how they are capturing the data, she says, they see better why the data matters.

Perry stresses the importance of schools staying in touch with students. "Invite former graduates back," she suggests, "to find out how they're doing as a kind of system measure" and to gain a true picture of whether a school's transition planning processes are making a difference for students.

"You do so many things," she says, speaking to the special education directors, "but when the kids are successful, you begin to see the fruits of your labor." ■

For more information about CCIP, visit their website at <https://ccip.sccoe.org/home>

1 See <https://tsschoices.aarp.org/scorecard-report/2023/dimensions-and-indicators/employment-rate-people-disabilities>



New Constituent Office Supports Families

Navigating the special education system can be complex for families seeking services and support for their children. Even when their goal is simply to support their children, parents and family members sometimes find themselves feeling at odds with the system.

The good news is that families don't have to navigate these complications alone. Support is available through the Constituent Support Services Office. This new, "one-stop shop" within the Special Education Division of the California Department of Education provides guidance for any special education issue that families might encounter.

Veronica Coates, assistant superintendent of the Tehama County SELPA and executive director of the Pathways to Partnership (P2P) consortium, says that the Constituent Support Services Office is a reflection of Special Education Director Rachel Heenan's dedication to supporting students and families, as well as school districts and charter schools. Once the need for such an office was identified, Director Heenan worked with members of the Pathways to Partnerships consortium and other partners, "and she opened the office really quickly," Coates says.

Pathways to Partnership staff were integral in developing the plan for the new office, and they are a key partner in the effort—for good reason. Some of the calls the Constituent Support Services Office receives that can be best addressed through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) services are routed to Pathways to Partnership.

ADR is a voluntary, informal

approach to resolving conflicts between families and schools regarding special education services. One of the office's primary goals is to use ADR whenever possible to avoid unnecessary disputes, maintain relationships, and best serve children. (In addition to ADR, the California Department of Education Special Education Division Dispute Resolution Page at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/disputeresolution.asp> provides resources and information



related to parent rights in special education, mediation services, state compliance complaints, and due process complaints and hearings.)

Lisa Lui is one of the four CDE staff members who work in the Constituent Support Services Office. Most of the calls that she and her colleagues receive, she says, come from parents and caregivers. She knows that they often need help as they work to get needed services for their children. But she also talks with a range of people who work with and support children with disabilities in the state. In addition to parents, the office fields calls from school district representatives, advocates, service providers, and anyone

else who needs information or a referral.

Sometimes she can tell that the parents who call are tired and frustrated, and sometimes they are just beginning to search for resources. Some calls last a few minutes, others more than an hour.

Lui has gained knowledge herself from doing research for callers. "It makes me feel good," she says. "I'm excited to see how we can grow and build upon what we're doing now."

Human Connection

Stacy Alvey is a director at Pathways to Partnership and director of Family and School Collaboration for the Ventura County SELPA. "I think what's so important here," she says, when talking about the Constituent Support Services Office, "is that it's really CDE's effort to establish human connection." She says that building relationships between families and their districts is vital to getting the support that students with disabilities need.

Aubrie Fulk agrees. She is also a director at Pathways to Partnership as well as the director of Student, Family, and District Support for the Tehama County Department of Education. The Constituent Support Services Office was set up, she says, to "have someone actually there to answer the phone calls and hear and talk and learn how to actively listen to people."

Pathways to Partnership has trained Lui and her colleagues on facilitation skills to help them talk with callers in an effective and appropriate way. Lui emphasizes that they cannot give legal advice,

but they can point callers toward relevant sections of the Education Code and regulations, as well as information and resources related to their parental rights. She also connects them to local organizations such as Family Empowerment Centers and SELPAs, and to resources that support dispute resolution, if needed.

Fulk says they use the metaphor of an old-school telephone switchboard. The call comes in, and CDE staff plugs them in to the right resource.

Between September 2025 and May 2026, the Constituent Support Office responded to more than 2,500 calls. Every call was answered or returned within 24 hours by a staff member who provided guidance, answered questions, or connected families with additional resources. Denise Lee, education programs consultant at the Policy and Initiatives Unit of the Special Education Division, says that most common areas of support and inquiry involve Section 504 Plans and IEPs, dispute resolution processes, information on accessing educational records, and information on nonpublic schools.

The Value of ADR

In many cases of conflict, says Fulk, both parties want the same thing. But if trust has been broken, each side may be having trouble hearing the other and recognizing what they have in common. In these cases, the organization arranges confidential, facilitated meetings where Fulk or other trained facilitators talk to both parties separately to find potential common ground, directing the conversation away from “what their demands are” and towards a recognition of the feelings underneath.

Fulk says that districts and families are “going to be in each other’s lives for a very long time,” possibly from preschool to age 22. Good communication, mutual respect, and a collaborative mindset are important for everyone involved.

She remembers one case where each side wanted the same result but was going about it in a different way. “The school wanted inclusion, and the parents

wanted inclusion, but how they were saying it was different.” The parents did not feel that the IEP reflected what they wanted. “Once we were able to peel back those layers and really talk about it, it was a huge win for both parties.” Both sides apologized, and in the end they all agreed and achieved a signed IEP, “which is ultimately what we want—to get our youth the services they deserve and they’re eligible for.”

Alvey points out that it doesn’t always happen like that, but “when it does, it makes our work so worthwhile.” She says that sometimes the wins are very small, but they will take any win to help support students and families.

Fulk says that the calls that come to Pathways to Partnership represent a continuum from high-conflict situations to a simple need for more information. “I just assumed a lot of parents and people out in the community knew of Family Empowerment Centers and knew what SELPAs were, but they don’t.” Pathways to Partnership and the Constituent Support Office are trying to fill that void. “So even if you’re just trying to gather information and you don’t know who your local school district is, or who your local SELPA is, or who you can reach out to for support,” the Constituent Support Services Office and its partner organizations are ready with the answers.

Feeling Heard

Coates says that as far as she knows, there’s never been anything like this for families in California. She urges parents to use the office, even for small requests. Ultimately, the goal is to support parents of students with disabilities in whatever challenge they are facing. That “in and of itself,” she says, “can prevent a dispute.”

For additional information or assistance, contact the Constituent Support Services Office at 800-926-0648, Monday through Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Messages left outside of business hours will be returned within 24 hours. You may also contact the office by email at SEDCO@cde.ca.gov. ■

West End SELPA: Heroes Are Among Us!

West End SELPA in San Bernardino County honored the talented students receiving special education services in its area with an Art and Writing Showcase on April 16 in Ontario. Students and their families gathered at Chaffey High School Auditorium and enjoyed visits with educators, local school mascots—and even Batman! Student art was on display and students performed music and dance numbers while a full house cheered them on. This annual event celebrated the themes of courage, compassion, perseverance, “and the everyday heroes we all can be.”

Watch for more on the Art and Writing Showcase in the next issue of The Special EDge. ■

