

## **Better Outcomes for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Action Plan for High Schools**

Voices from Key Stakeholders  
2014 Autism Society of America  
Annual Conference  
Indianapolis, IN



## **How High Schools Can Help Students Become Better Equipped for Life Afterward**

Studies have shown that students with ASD have the greatest chance for post-secondary school success when:

1. They build critical skills such as self-advocacy and independence,
2. Schools develop structures and systems for a more seamless transition to post-school opportunities, and,
3. Communities identify and develop partnerships and systems of support for students with ASD after high school.

At a special session of the 2014 Autism Society of America annual conference, we gathered important input from young adults on the autism spectrum, their families, employers, school professionals, post-secondary service providers, and others regarding the needs of high school students with ASD. As over 70 participants considered how to better equip students, schools, and communities, four critical issues emerged during the session, each of which research also has identified as essential to address in order to promote optimal outcomes for students with ASD:

1. Employment
2. Post-High School Education
3. Self-advocacy and independence
4. Relationships.

Based on their experiences, successes, and forethought, participants provided several real-world Action Steps for high schools to address each of these four critical issues.



### ***ACTION STEPS for High Schools***

#### ***Employment***

**In order to support students' success in future employment, high schools should:**

- Help students recognize their strengths and help them match these strengths to potential jobs.
- Focus on what students want to do, not what we think they can do!
- Work with students, families, and communities to:
  - Set expectations
  - Find available jobs
  - Educate employers on ASD
  - Educate on accommodations in work settings (ADA)
  - Bring employers into schools
  - Find transportation for students with ASD to get to jobs after high school
  - Find support for associated conditions of unemployment (e.g., isolation)
- Provide internships/apprenticeships in high school departments.
- Include job skills and employment education in the high school curriculum, such as:
  - How to interview
  - Employee rights
  - Understanding job responsibility
  - Supervision, what it is and what it looks like
  - Appropriately taking criticism and feedback

- Hidden social curriculum of the worksite
- Problem solving skills
- Ability to work with others
- How to build relationships with employers and co-workers
- How to ask for help
- Self-determination skills
- Understanding the difference between work and school
- Develop opportunities for job site training in high school:
  - Arrange for multiple work-site opportunities
  - Take field trips to visit potential employment sites
  - Set up behavior supports in work settings that students can take with them to their future employment setting post high school
  - Arrange for job coaching/mentoring
  - Provide more career training opportunities for alternate diploma recipients

### ***Post-Secondary Education***

**In order to support students' success in college, university, apprenticeships and other post-secondary education experiences, high schools should:**

- Educate students on what programs are available.
- Integrate life skills and real world situations into the high school curriculum.
- Provide peer support and instruction on life skills.
- Start preparing students for post-secondary transition early.
- Provide opportunities for students to access college courses in high school.
- Communicate with higher education institutions to gain a better understanding of the skills students need to be successful.
- Provide students with opportunities to experience what post-secondary education looks like (e.g., take a field trip to a college, sit in on a college class, review the daily schedule of a college student)
- Educate students and families on post-secondary education options, including:
  - 2 year community colleges
  - 4 year colleges
  - Non-degree college programs
- Work with families and the community to:
  - To set appropriate expectations for student (not too high, not too low)
  - Access post-secondary education resources
  - Work with parents on what their role is during post-secondary education.
  - Find colleges that have resources to help students with ASD and students with other exceptional needs, such as bridge programs
  - Educate college communities on ASD
  - Arrange for a student mentor once the student begins college



### ***Self-Advocacy/Independence***

**In order to support students' independence and self-advocacy, high schools should:**

- Help student identify his/her goals.
- Provide students with choices so they are able to practice independent decision making.
- Provide opportunities and implement interventions to help support students in building a peer support network.
- Request permission from parents and students to disclose students' disability, strengths, and needs to school personnel.
- Provide professional development to middle and high school personnel on how to teach and promote self-advocacy/independence skills.
- Work with families and communities to:
  - Educate emergency personnel (e.g., police, firemen/women) on what autism is, how to identify if a person has autism, and how having autism will impact the way a person communicates and responds to emergency personnel
  - Bring awareness of individuals with ASD in the community (with parent and student permission) to help protect individuals with ASD in emergency situations (e.g., community person can tell 911 dispatcher that the individual does have ASD to prepare the police)
- Include self-advocacy and independence skills in the high school curriculum, including:
  - Accepting failure
  - How to ask for help
  - How to disclose name, address, phone, and autism diagnosis if in an emergency situation
  - Practicing problem solving
  - Daily living skills

### ***Relationships and Health***

**In order to support students' in developing and maintaining positive friendships, romantic relationships, and other relationships, schools should:**

- Increase awareness and supervision and implement interventions to protect students with ASD from being victimized and abused by peers.
- Address social interactions related to romantic relationships in IEPs.
- Talk about it! Include sex and relationship education in the curriculum.
- Provide resources for students and families to ask questions about romantic relationships and health related topics (e.g., a designated person in the school or in the community for families and students with ASD to go to with questions).

