



**Student-Family Centric
Seamless Transition
Your Step-by-Step Guide
March 2025**



INDIANA INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY AND COMMUNITY
**CENTER ON COMMUNITY
LIVING AND CAREERS**

Student-Family Centric Seamless Transition

Your Step-by-Step Guide

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The Center on Community Living and Careers (CCLC) is one of seven centers located at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Indiana University, Bloomington. The mission of the Center on Community Living and Careers is to promote partnerships between schools and support organizations to bring about positive changes in the lives of individuals and families as they live, work, and participate in their communities.



INDIANA INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY AND COMMUNITY

CENTER ON COMMUNITY LIVING AND CAREERS

2810 East Discovery Parkway
Bloomington, IN 47408-2601
(812) 855-6508


cclc@indiana.edu

www.iidc.indiana.edu.cclc



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Student-Family Centric Seamless Transition

Introduction

This is the fourth and final guide in a four-part series on seamless transition, [Student-Family Centric Seamless Transition](#). This guide examines the crucial role of family team membership as the hallmark of our evaluation. The first guide, [Understanding and Implementing a Seamless Transition Program](#), established a foundational understanding of the key components and processes. The second guide, [Understanding and Expanding Interagency Team Membership](#), shares key insights and practical interagency team-building strategies. The third guide, [A Seamless Transition Timeline: When to Engage Professionals and What to Expect from Their Services](#) includes a transition timeline (roadmap) and offers a practical toolkit providing comprehensive seamless transition checklists with student-led IEP alignment. Key insights from the Indiana Seamless Transition Pilot are highlighted throughout each guide in the series.

Program Background

Indiana’s Department of Education (IDOE) and the Division of Disability and Rehabilitation Services (DDRS) hope to increase the number of individuals with disabilities in competitive and integrated employment from 23% to 38% by 2027. To further this mission, the Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Services partnered with [TransCen](#), a nationally renowned organization dedicated to inclusive education and employment, to pilot seamless transition programs across the state. The [“Improving Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities in Indiana”](#) seamless transition pilot began in the spring of 2023. Eight schools joined the pilot, representing diverse regions across Indiana. Those schools picked three families they thought would be willing to participate in the pilot to help improve outcomes for their children. The pilot aimed to improve team capacity, engagement of employers and families, and employment outcomes for students with significant disabilities. Schools were tasked with developing interagency teams that included, at a minimum, the student, their family, and external partners like Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).

At each pilot site, the Center for Community Living and Careers (CCLC) at Indiana University’s Indiana Institute on Disability and Community (IIDC) evaluated seamless transition activities along with the perceptions and experiences of family members and professionals. Our research findings identified strengths and weaknesses. In this guide, we give a brief overview of seamless transition. Next, we discuss the challenges families experience as they navigate several siloed systems as they care for their children over time. Their ability to effectively navigate and interact within medical, educational, and social service systems, coupled with community

engagement, is crucial. We conclude with future-oriented suggestions drawn from parent interviews and focus groups.

Overview of Seamless Transition

TransCen (2023) defines seamless transition as a coordinated process with the culmination of special education services for all students with disabilities, including paid employment or a defined career path, where the first day of a student's adult life looks like the last day of their school-to-work program. To accomplish this, seamless transition prioritizes many important practices (Test, et al., 2009; Carter, et al., 2012; Luecking & Luecking, 2015).

- **Full inclusion in general education with a defined program of study.**
- **Diverse interagency team membership that includes school personnel, adult-serving agencies, and families.**
- **Open and active Pre-Employment Transition (Pre-ETS) and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services.**
- **Benefits planning with the assistance of a navigator or liaison.**
- **Early onset of varied student-driven work-based learning experiences**
- **Independent living and self-advocacy skill development.**
- **Obtain and maintain Competitive, Integrated Employment (CIE).**
- **Graduation with an alternative or high school diploma.**

The end goal, therefore, is for students to leave high school employed and with community-living skills that promote and sustain independence (Certo & Luecking, 2011). To support successful transitions, existing interagency teams must evolve to prioritize family involvement as a core partnership.

Trusting family-school partnerships lead to positive student outcomes when there are (a) respectful, mutually beneficial relationships with shared responsibility, (b) options for meaningful involvement, and (c) positive school responses to family interests and involvement.

(www.swiftschools.org)

Family Experiences

The hopeful outcome of the seamless transition pilot was student success in career exploration leading to employment before leaving high school. However, getting to that point involves using tools and processes that highlight the importance of building and strengthening relationships.

Strengthening Relationships

Building strong relationships is essential for the following three groups:

1. **Interagency team members** (among one another and with the families).
2. **Parents of students with disabilities** (with schools, agencies, and community employers).
3. **Employers in the community** (with schools, agencies, students, and their families).

The results from our evaluation of Indiana's seamless transition pilot showed that there were levels of success in the three groups. Still, typically, it was relationship development among interagency team members and one or two individuals on the team connecting with the student, a parent, or an employer. This evaluation excluded the perception of employers, however, that is another important perspective to include in another pilot program.

Interagency Teams Strengthened Their Relationships

Collectively, interagency team members showed the greatest relationship development at each site. They made stronger connections and streamlined processes for efficiency once roles were defined. Team members used the Positive Personal Profile (PPP) to assess student strengths and learned from families and employers through the interviews. Yet all teams acknowledged they had not reached out as much to families as they had hoped.

Family-Team Relationships Were Not Strengthened

One of the most crucial elements in strengthening relationships is clear, consistent communication. Interagency teams acknowledged their lack of communication with the families, hoping that they could improve as time went on. However, the timing of a few schools joining the pilot did not allow for much implementation before the school year ended. They were then having to catch up when the new school year began. Families felt that the schools and agencies could have reached out along the way to at least communicate what had or had not occurred and if they needed to do something more.

Family Capital

Family Capital is a unique type of social capital that can create wealth, greater than money, especially for parents raising children with disabilities. There are some things that money cannot buy and that is true when there is a disabling condition in the family. There are times when social isolation and the judgment of others can be another disabling factor for families. Families with children experiencing the impacts of disability find themselves on a lonely road if they are not connected with other families, or to a mix of outside-family supportive organizations with social and functional support. Families report that each member of the family can be situationally disabled at times, depending on the balance of bonding and bridging relationships, resources, and supports. The important bridging and bonding elements of Family Capital, highly strengthened by supportive interagency transition teams, are shown in Figure 1 (Hansen and Gilbert, 2012).

Figure 1

Family Capital Theory of Role-Exchange

High Bonding (Family Connectedness)	
<u>Healthy with Coping Risks</u>	<u>Healthy/Resilient Family</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ High family connectedness ❖ Too heavy a burden on family members ❖ Severe risks to one or more members ❖ Draining emotional/physical reserves ❖ Possible enmeshment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Strong family resilience ❖ Good use of individual strengths ❖ Strong and varied social supports, ❖ Use of available services ❖ Community activity
Low Bridging (Weak/Few Social Supports)	High Bridging (Strong Social Supports)
<u>High Risks for Low Resilience</u>	<u>Coping Based on Available Support</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Isolation ❖ Low resilience ❖ Poor coping ❖ Low family connectedness ❖ Low social support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Strong social supports /resources ❖ Go to others over family for needs ❖ Low family connectedness ❖ Living parallel lives
Low Bonding (Family Disconnectedness)	

The table above (Hansen and Gilbert, 2012) shows that families of students with disabilities have the best quality of life and resilience in the upper right quadrant, where there is balance in bonding relationships and bridging to resources and other supports. The importance of developing bonding and bridging relationships and support cannot be understated. Families, professionals, and teams can identify which quadrant they feel they are currently in, analyze why, and plan how to move upward and/or to the right. These elements can also help policymakers decide on the best allocation of limited resources.

The upper right quadrant is the best place to be. It signifies healthy, resilient families. There are close bonds within the family, balanced with outside family relationships and with resources that can provide extra support. For example, each family member might expand their bonds with the transition team supporting their child. These extended bonds can link them to information on how to apply for benefits, access valuable agency resources, including assistive technology, and greater involvement in the community.

The upper left quadrant illustrates high family connectedness. However, when families rely on their familial bonding relationships alone, without other vital supports and resources, there is often too heavy a burden on at least one family member who carries the most weight. Some might speculate that others feel this stress and, therefore, try not to put further burden on that family by asking too much of them. This, however, continues to add to the burden and can keep families isolated without the outside bonding and bridging that can add to a sense of community, where they do not feel alone. Therefore, although they have the advantage of a strong family, they need further connection to information, resources, and additional trusted bonding relationships.

An example is when transition teams believe they are alleviating additional stress by not inviting parents to additional meetings, while families feel that being left out keeps them ill-informed and isolated. Families want to, at least, be invited, knowing their expertise and experience are valued and their opinions taken into consideration. Families acknowledge they sometimes have stressful lives, but that it should be up to them to decide if the benefit of joining a given group meeting would outweigh any cost. There may be times when they cannot attend, or only one member can attend, but the invitation with an informative agenda would be highly appreciated and helpful. This advanced notice can help them prepare and create an opportunity to move closer to the upper right quadrant, feeling less isolated and not alone in their efforts for their child.

The lower right quadrant shows families with access to outside agency services, community support, or highly supportive schools. However, they are missing the value of significant familial or other close bonding. The lack of bonding within the family could be for a variety of reasons, such as high-conflict families with trauma, addictions, loss, grieving, or unexpected changes

within the family dynamic. These families may be used to this dynamic and have learned to rely on systems and outside resources, or they may be new to this situation and are looking for family-like relationships within the greater community.

The lower left quadrant identifies families who are floundering, isolated, and without strong bonding relationships or bridging resources. Often, the point of contact for these families is teachers, social workers, or health professionals. These families might be in financial poverty and/or at high risk for many health issues, leading to poor coping abilities. In this case, school personnel often feel the burden to find help for these families. This is where team building and community support can be challenging yet vital in helping families build trusted relationships and find the help they need.

Pilot Data

Using the Family Capital model to understand the data, we outline important elements from the families in the pilot. In the first year of the pilot, after the initial meeting, all families felt movement toward a better quadrant, regardless of their starting point. Most families started at a point in the upper left-hand quadrant, moving toward the right quadrant to various degrees. Other families were in the bottom right or left at some point in their journey. All families desired to move further to the right, and some needed to move up and to the right. Some families felt the support of the transition team assisting them in helping their child find employment in an area of their skill set and interest, even before the pilot, furthering their independence and growth. The increased bridging and bonding of emotional and social connections during the family interview positively affected all the families in that moment. It increased the interconnectedness of the families to the interagency teams, as well as connected the interagency teams to the families.

Each family and each team member felt more connected through the family interview and when sharing the results of the PPP. They expressed, literally and figuratively, that more people were “on our team, trying to help [our child].”

However, after that initial experience, each family tended to move back to the position in the quadrant they had been in before, with some significant disappointment, and feelings of isolation that they were on their own to figure things out. They all indicated a lack of communication and a worse feeling of isolation in contrast to the hope they initially felt with such an intimate sharing experience during the family interview. The close emotional support experienced by families on the day they were invited to the family interview could have continued to build a strong relationship. But then that connection felt broken without an explanation.

Families Felt Excluded

Families felt excluded from the seamless transition process following their visit for the family interview. Initially, they experienced great hope for their child's future and possibilities for community employment with the team enthusiasm during their family interview and with the results of the (PPP). However, they felt confused and unsure of what was to happen next, even when they asked. They were awaiting direct communication and updates from team members, but most families felt excluded and confused about what was happening. Many indicated that their child's job experiences had been arranged for before the pilot and/or were not related to what was discussed during the family interview.

From the schools' and agencies' points of view, they were waiting to contact families when they had more definitive answers. They did not want to make any promises that could not be kept. They indicated that families were either too busy, overwhelmed, or not able to be involved at this point. They believed they were doing the right thing, yet acknowledged there was not enough communication.

Families Want Information and Training

All the families wanted more information. Most parents wanted actual training to understand the pilot and where they could get the information they did not have access to, following their family interview.

All the families knew about the employer interview and wanted to know how it went. Several families wanted to attend the employer interviews to learn about businesses in their community and to think about potential connections for their child and for other students they were aware of. A few families suggested that they might be helpful to other families through their current connections with employers who they felt would be open to employing students with disabilities to do specific skill-based tasks.

Families also thought that it would be helpful for them to learn how to approach employers who were not in the pilot by seeing it modeled for them. They indicated that learning the approach could be helpful to make future employment site connections to share with the interagency teams for their child as well as for others. Understanding the seamless transition principles and seeing them in practice through attending employer interviews would be a valuable experience for many families.

Families Need Consistent, Clear Communication

Parents were seeking consistent and clear information from the interagency team members throughout the process to better support their children. All locations struggled to meet this standard. Families frequently found themselves without updates on their child's progress,

resulting in missed information and opportunities. This contributed to parents feeling disconnected and hindered their ability to assist the team.

The following are paraphrased parental concerns:

- We reached out and did not receive any information or follow-through.
- Even if things didn't work out as expected, we would have wanted to know about it and to help make a backup plan.
- Even hearing bad news would have been better than hearing nothing.
- We received broken and unclear communication from the agencies and the schools.
- We would have offered our community connections if we'd been included on the team.

Families as Partners

Research over time shows the power of family-school partnerships. Strong partnerships are especially important in special education, yielding benefits for all involved, especially the student.

The partnership between teacher and parent is one of the most important partnerships for the long-term good of the student. For students in special education, the parent-teacher partnership is especially important. The establishment of a consistent, positive, and active relationship between the special education teacher and parent yields benefits for all involved.

Families, schools, and agencies all experience role overload at times with minimal bonding and bridging within teams. We suggest that the family voice, family social capital, and overall family experience be added to the team. This deliberate action will address the key issues that families and teams have in their interagency experiences.

Often, we develop supportive "work families." What we suggest here is adding to the Team-Family that was created within the interagency teams, by adding the family as an important member of the team. That brings on literal and figurative meaning for Team-Family Capital. The term team-family has attributes of a closely bonded family and has families as active transition team members. The potential of this can be seen in this figure with the most impactful suggestions for highly effective teams located in the upper right quadrant.

Figure 2

Team-Family Capital Theory of Role-Exchange

High Bonding (Team-Family Connectedness)	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Segmented Team Bonds</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Connectedness among some members ❖ Some agency/family members felt left out ❖ Heavy burden on a few team members ❖ Relying on siloed roles and processes ❖ Unclear communication ❖ Lack of administrative support ❖ Severe stress to one or more members ❖ Available social support ❖ Few resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Little access to services and community 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Highly Effective Teams</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Strong team-family relationships ❖ Family members as partners ❖ High team connectedness ❖ Consistent clear communication ❖ Valuable use of individual strengths ❖ Strong administrative support ❖ Strong and varied social support ❖ Strong collective social capital ❖ Strong and varied resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Access to services and community
Low Bridging (Weak/Few Supports/Resources)	High Bridging (Strong Supports and Resources)
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>High Risk for Ineffective Teams</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Low team connectedness ❖ Family not considered a team member ❖ Isolation of family or team members ❖ Poor/infrequent communication ❖ Unclear expectations/roles ❖ Low social support ❖ Few resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Little access to services and community 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Function Based on Support/Resources</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Low extended team connectedness ❖ Limited family communication ❖ Functional communication ❖ Strong administrative support ❖ Access to financial or other resources ❖ Use of interagency resources ❖ Use of other professional resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Access to services and community
Low Bonding (Team-Family Disconnectedness)	

- **The upper right quadrant** represents **elements of highly effective teams**. This space acknowledges balancing both *bonding relationships* with *bridging resources* for success.
- **The lower-left quadrant** represents **elements of the least effective teams**, indicating the absence of bonding relationships and bridging resources.

- **The upper-left quadrant** indicates *high bonding*, yet *low bridging* with some members and yet lacking resources.
- **The lower-right quadrant** indicates *high bridging* to needed resources yet *low bonding*, lacking vital trusted relationships.

After listening to interagency teams and families, it was easy to see everyone's good intentions. While several locations had many elements of highly effective interagency teams, balancing bonding relationships with bridging resources, others had a mix of being somewhere along the continuum between quadrants. However, the missing links or vital elements for further team growth and continued expansion for greater team-family capital include:

- **Full team membership for families** with the potential of adding families' social capital to the collective while expanding the bonding relationships between professionals and families for improved trust, communication, potential employer expansion, and team use of their unique expertise.
- **Strong administrative support** within and among schools and agencies. The importance of administrative support cannot be understated. Each team believed their success was due to the dedicated support received from school leadership and agency support.
- **Team connectedness** using the individual strengths and resources of each team member, clarifying roles and responsibilities to leverage valuable resources.
- **Clear, consistent communication** keeps everyone from families to schools and outside agencies abreast of all updates, changes, or employment possibilities,

How Do Interagency Teams Create Parent Partnerships?

Parent partnerships go beyond mere involvement and engagement. Transition teams should create reciprocal collaborations that build trust with families. Through respectful, united teamwork, meaningful opportunities for student achievement and success are made possible. Consider discussing these questions in your units (within schools, agencies, and families). Develop thoughtful answers and strategies that specifically use the critical elements of bonding relationships and bridging resources to help all involved, especially the student. Then come together as a team to discuss how best to move toward the most highly effective team in your area.

Consider the following questions from the [SWIFT Education Center's Trusting Family Partnerships Resource](#):

1. How are family partnerships defined at our school?
2. What roles do family members currently hold at our school?
3. How are family partnerships important to student outcomes?

4. What are our school's goals for partnering with family members in the short term and long run?

Parents As Transition Team Members

Parents play a critical part in the case conference committee, especially when it comes to transition discussions and final decisions about their child's education, safety, and future. All team members should work collaboratively with family members to address the needs of the students. An open line of consistent communication is the first step in building trust among members of the transition team.

Parents Provide a Keen Perspective

Parents can provide essential details about a child's academic and behavioral strengths and challenges, interests, and needs. Parents can share their own observations from inside the home and in social settings. Additionally, a family's ideas, values, and environment can influence how a child develops and behaves.

Parents Champion Their Child

A parent's perspective may differ from other team members, and that is okay. When parents are seen as active team members, they are more likely to share concerns and offer solutions. Parents can continue the momentum toward meeting academic and behavioral goals in the home by reinforcing strategies and services.

Parents are a Second Set of Eyes with Valuable Insight

Parents can assist educational professionals in monitoring and tracking progress toward all benchmarks and goals with consistent communication from the school. They can offer insight and feedback on what is working and what needs a new approach.

Conclusion

The full potential of the pilot has yet to be seen. We saw great strengths of interagency teams and families separately. The vision of combining those strengths offers further opportunities and shared resources that benefit everyone. When families, transition teams, and the greater community work together, reciprocal relationships strengthen individuals, families, schools, agencies, employers, and society. There are many resources available for more ideas on strengthening partnerships with the parents of students with disabilities.

Resources

[Center on Community Living and Careers: Effective and Positive Communication Among Parents and Schools](#)

[Center on Community Living and Careers: Effective Communication Main Messages](#)

[IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University: Family Engagement: Collaborating with Families of Students with Disabilities](#)

[National Association for the Education of Young Children: Principles of Effective Family Engagement](#)

[Office of Children's Services: Recruiting and Retaining Parent Members on Interagency Teams](#)

[SWIFT Education Center: Trusting Family Partnerships](#)

[PACER Center: Events, Resources, and Newsletters](#)

[TransCen: Family Engagement Webinar Series](#)

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