

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you so much for making time to hear about our experiences transitioning our young adults from high school to independent adult lives. Clearly this is a difficult transition for many young people and even more so for those on the autism spectrum. Those on the spectrum who have the capacity to be self supporting and independent are disproportionately at risk for being under or unemployed due to the nature of their disabilities. It behooves us as a society to do all that we can to prepare these young people so that they feel the success of independence and do not become dependent upon their families or the state. Thank you for taking the time to help in this endeavor.

My son fits that above group of young people. He is 21 and has the dual diagnosis of PDD.NOS and ADHD. He is currently in his third year beyond high school and we are still working towards an independent future. I will describe a bit of our experiences below, dividing the stages chronologically.

#### WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL

Our school was very collaborative for many years, willing to think outside the box and craft a program that uniquely responded to my son's needs. With the help of Jane Thierfeld Brown we had a transition plan that seemed to be perfect. Up until the end of my son's junior year, our plan was for a 5 year high school program, since we were using about 25% of my son's school day to support his special needs. This was necessary, but meant that he couldn't take many of the usual college prep classes that his non-handicapped peers took. He took some technical education classes as a bridge to his desired engineering degree and as a fall back plan if college failed. He took music and woodworking classes because they would give him opportunities to socialize with other students and to develop life skills that he could use for social connection as an adult, social connection being an issue for adults on the spectrum. As a result, he skipped foreign language and he took only 3 years of math and only 3 years of science. That was a disadvantage for a student who hoped to study engineering, but the day is only so long and compromises needed to be made. By the end of his junior year, when meeting with Mrs. Brown, she suggested that she was concerned that a fifth year in the high school at age 19, would place my son in school with far younger students who would not model the more mature skills that a college student needed. I agreed. When that was voiced at his annual PPT meeting, his high school team agreed, and without my being totally aware, his graduation date was changed on his IEP, and any discussion of the five year plan ended. No matter how I tried in the upcoming year, there was never room for considering a middle option. He had two options, full time attendance as a "super senior" within the high school or graduation without any further services from the public schools. What he needed was something in between, but the school was no longer willing to think outside the box. I was told that only a small percentage of special education students were given services in the 18-21 year old range, and those were for the severely handicapped. What my son needed was enrollment in local college level courses at a community college or regional state campus while still getting support services to ease the transition and

develop the skills needed to manage time, money and social relationships necessary for success in college and later in independent life and the workforce. The high school did involve my son with BRS early on and a representative was present at most of his IEP meetings. We were told that BRS could provide services such as job placement and tutoring during college to support future employment.

### POST GRADUATION

At my own expense, I enrolled my son in a residential, transitional program for college aged students where he lived and attended community college for two years. He gained many skills while there, became more independent and amassed college credits, but did not fulfill all the requirements to earn his associates degree. While there, we attempted to supplement the services we were paying for with some from BRS, but found that to be difficult. . It took into my son's second semester of college to arrange a structural tutor to help with managing his school work, despite the fact that his needs in that area were no surprise and well documented. We were told that first semester that BRS didn't have any available tutors to offer my son. It fell to me to recommend potential tutors and try to facilitate a relationship between those individuals and BRS. It took a whole semester to accomplish that goal, while my son waited. BRS lacked the resources to follow through on what we had been promised informally. Once it was arranged, the fault then fell to my son who did not use the service as well as he should have.... We did not try the next year. BRS was also willing to help with finding a part time job. The purpose of that was to support my son's learning how to balance work and school, as well as get needed job experience. In that first year out of college, BRS outsourced that task to another agency and a year went by with no work secured despite reasonable effort on my son's part. At the end of the year, the BRS worker was surprised that he had never had a job. At times my son has been successful finding work on his own or with family support, and at other times he has not. We haven't tried to find work through BRS since then. One of the obstacles with BRS is that the worker wants to deal directly with the student, but organizing and following through on those types of supports is one my son's areas of need. It felt like an awful Catch 22, that my son couldn't get services until he was able to make repeated efforts to advocate for those services himself. To get services through BRS, one needs to be a very persistent advocate. A second problem was that BRS seems to lack resources themselves.

### YEAR THREE

My son is back living at home and has transitioned from community college to the regional campus of UCONN, a step closer to his goal of attending and graduating from a 4 year institution. If he succeeds at this campus and meets the academic requirements, it is his hope to continue on to complete an engineering degree. If he succeeds, it will be because he has gained the independent living skills and the academic skills that he needed in the two year residential program that I enrolled him in. What he needed was a slow, 3 year transition from high school, through community college within a supported residential community, and on to a regional college campus. That step by step approach will hopefully help him to meet and master the skills he needs before taking on the challenge of succeeding at a residential college full of academic challenges and social opportunities that can challenge even many students without the added burden of social

learning disabilities. It has been a good plan and one that I remain guardedly hopeful will succeed. But the brunt of the planning, funding and execution of this task has fallen to me.

It is my hope that the public schools will find a way to craft transitional programs for a variety of disabled students that help bridge the gap between the high school experience and the real life world of college and/or work. Our most severely handicapped students usually receive such services. It is sad that those most likely to be able to live independently are the very ones least likely to get additional services beyond the traditional 4 years of high school. ***My son did not graduate from high school with the skills that he needed to succeed at college, despite that being his transition goal.*** It fell to his family to make sure that happened. Students such as he have two competing sets of needs to meet in the limited hours during high school, meeting the academic requirements that will earn them a place in college and developing the ancillary skills that will allow them to succeed once they get there. My son was denied further services after his four years in high school due to either an unwillingness to think outside the box or pure budgetary limitations. Our special education students who have the capacity to become self-supporting and independent need a bridge into the real world that will support them in becoming independent and successful in the worlds of college and work that they will enter upon completion of their senior year. I believe that the special education laws support such services for students up to the age of 21. There needs to be a commitment to fully prepare all such students to transition to the next step in their lives and a willingness to think outside the box in crafting those services.

Thank you so much for your time.

Most sincerely,

Elyse Landesberg