

Will 18+ Adult Transition Programs Be Part-Time Next Year?

By Karri Axtell, J.D.

Many parents of students age 18 - 21 in Fort Bend ISD and Lamar CISD have reached out to The Arc concerned about the 18+ Adult Transition Program (ATP) next school year. Parents hear from campus staff they should start looking for a part-time day habilitation program since the 18+ ATP will only be available to their student for a half day next school year. Parents of children with the most substantial needs are concerned because the very nature of their child's disability requires more instruction and break times to process and master what they are learning. For these students, academic and functional skills gains may be slow, but the long-term impact on their quality of life and independence is great. These students require a highly structured program with frequent breaks and repetition. If such a program were compressed into a half-day, parents realize their child may not get the time they need to understand and benefit from the instruction. Unfortunately, this article may raise more questions than it answers. Hopefully an exploration of the issue will prompt a productive dialogue between parents and school staff to ensure each special education student's individual educational needs are being appropriately served. Parents of 18+ ATP students are encouraged to contact The Arc of Fort Bend for education advocacy strategies and information about community programs and resources that may help with the adult transition process.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal civil rights law, assures a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students with a disability from kindergarten through the age of 21. In Texas, all K – 12 students, including special education students, are required to learn the “TEKS” (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), and receive 75,600 instructional hours each school year. However, once a student graduates from 12th grade, there are no “TEKS” required and no minimum number of instructional hours an 18+ student with disabilities is to receive. The IDEA states that these special education students may “return for services” to receive appropriate instruction that falls within three areas: further education (college/post-secondary programs); employment (trade & vocational preparation); and independent living.

Special education students with a PEIMS Instructional Code of 43 or 44 typically have a Pre-K to early elementary academic skill level, even though they have graduated from 12th grade. (PEIMS is the Public Education Information Management System schools use to report demographic, attendance, financial and other data to the Texas Education Agency (TEA)). An Instructional Code of 43 or 44 indicates the student receives instruction in a self-contained or more restrictive setting than their non-disabled peers for at least 51% or more of the school day.)

Many of these “43 or 44” students do not have mastery of the self-help or functional skills to successfully transition to a post-secondary education or employment program. These students continue to need a highly structured program with frequent breaks and repetition as they continue learning the independent living skills vital to improve their quality of life. Currently, most of these “43 or 44” students receive a full-day 18+ ATP program. But, this may change if School Districts reduce the 18+ ATP to half-day next school year.

While some students with a higher level of knowledge and understanding may only need a half-day 18+ ATP as they transition to post-secondary education or paid employment, the “43 or 44” students working on communication and other independent living skills may not receive meaningful educational benefit from a half-day program. For those whose developmental disability makes it difficult to obtain and retain information, maintaining the frequency and duration of instruction is imperative. The amount of special education services offered should be based on the student's unique, individual needs and include data from a comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation should assess the person's academic, functional, adaptive and behavioral needs. An evaluation should also consider how the person's disability impacts their ability to learn and retain information, and recommend related goals.

Whether your child is getting ready to graduate from high school or is already in the 18+ ATP, here are some things to consider:

1. When was their last Full Individual Evaluation (FIE)? (If it's been 2-3 years, you can request a new FIE.)
2. Were all new standardized assessments done? (A REED – Review of Existing Evaluation Data is NOT the same as an FIE. Students are entitled to an FIE, which contains all new standardized assessment data, at least every 3 years.)
3. If a FIE was done in the past year or two, but your child has changed during that time and you think new data is needed, you may request a new FIE.
4. If an FIE was done within the past 12 months but you disagree with it, you may request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) and request the School District pay for it.

We encourage 18+ ATP parents to reach out to the Special Education Department at their School District to raise any questions or concerns about proposed changes to District Special Education Programs and how it may impact their child's unique educational needs.

To share your story with us and see if there are additional community programs or services that may be available for your child, contact Karri Axtell at The Arc of Fort Bend. 281-494-5924 kaxtell@arcoffortbend.org