

## ABSTRACT

Title of the Capstone: **BETTER POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER THROUGH BACKWARD-DESIGNED TRANSITION PROGRAMMING AND PLANNING**

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Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including those with average to above-average cognitive ability, continue to experience disproportionately poor postsecondary outcomes.

National data show that enrollment, persistence, and degree completion rates for youth with ASD remain among the lowest of any disability group, despite decades of policy efforts to improve transition services. Research indicates that these outcomes are less related to academic capacity and more strongly associated with social competence, executive functioning, and self-advocacy.

The purpose of this study was to examine the existing literature on transition planning for students with ASD and to develop an improvement plan that addresses identified gaps in practice.

This capstone was guided by three research questions: (1) What are the post-school experiences of youth with ASD (ages 18-29) regarding college persistence? (2) What positive

and negative factors in high school transition planning and programming have been identified in the documented outcomes related to college persistence among youth with ASD? And (3) What emerging trends and effective models does research identify for transition planning for high-performing students with ASD?

A systematic review of the literature was conducted using peer-reviewed articles published within the past two decades. Findings across studies demonstrate that social isolation, executive functioning challenges, and limited advocacy skills contribute to low persistence. In contrast, protective factors include inclusive coursework, family engagement, and early, coordinated planning. Promising models, such as STEPS, COMPASS, and Transitioning Together, illustrate the practical elements of transition programming, including explicit skill instruction, family partnership, and interagency collaboration.

Drawing from these findings, the improvement plan developed in this study is a Transition Planning Framework (TPF) that begins in late elementary school and extends through high school graduation. The framework emphasizes early intervention, explicit instruction in seven interconnected skill areas, systematic assessment and progress monitoring, and coordinated family involvement. By aligning evidence-based practices with structured benchmarks, the TPF provides a practical approach to supporting the long-term persistence and independence of high-performing students with ASD.

*Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, transition planning, postsecondary outcomes, college persistence, social competence, self-advocacy*

**BETTER POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM  
SPECTRUM DISORDERS THROUGH BACKWARD-DESIGNED TRANSITION  
PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING**

By

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## **Dedication**

This capstone is dedicated to all of the students I have had the privilege to teach. Your curiosity, resilience, and willingness to grow have continually inspired my work and strengthened my passion for education.

To my daughters, whose joy and brilliance remind me every day why learning matters; to my husband whose steady encouragement and unwavering belief carried me through the most challenging moments; and to my family, who have supported me in countless seen and unseen ways— this accomplishment is also yours. Thank you for your love, patience, and endless support.

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## List of Abbreviations

The following list provides the abbreviations used throughout this dissertation. Each abbreviation is defined at first mention in the text, and all are compiled here for reference and ease of use.

| <b>Abbreviation</b> | <b>Full Term</b>                                           |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| ABLRS-R             | Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills – Revised |
| AFLS                | Assessment of Functional Living Skills                     |
| ADHD                | Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder                   |
| APA                 | American Psychological Association                         |
| ASD                 | Autism Spectrum Disorder                                   |
| COMPASS             | Collaborative Model for Promoting Competence and Success   |
| DOL                 | U.S. Department of Labor                                   |
| ESSA                | Every Student Succeeds Act                                 |
| FMHI                | Florida Mental Health Institute                            |
| GPA                 | Grade Point Average                                        |
| HFA                 | High-Functioning Autism                                    |
| IDEA                | Individuals with Disabilities Education Act                |
| IEP                 | Individualized Education Program                           |
| IQ                  | Intelligence Quotient                                      |

|               |                                                                            |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MMWR          | Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report                                      |
| NLTS / NLTS-2 | National Longitudinal Transition Study / Second wave                       |
| RCT           | Randomized Controlled Trial                                                |
| SCI / SCI-A   | Social Competence Intervention / Social Competence Intervention–Adolescent |
| SES           | Socioeconomic Status                                                       |
| STEM          | Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics                          |
| STEPS         | Stepped Transition in Education Program for Success                        |
| TAU           | Treatment As Usual                                                         |
| TPF           | Transition Planning Framework                                              |
| UK            | United Kingdom                                                             |
| UMD           | University of Maryland                                                     |
| US            | United States                                                              |
| VB-MAPP       | Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program                |

## **Glossary of Terms**

### **Astin’s Inputs, Environments, and Outcomes (I-E-O) Model**

A model which offers a classification scheme to evaluate how inputs (e.g., student characteristics) and environment (e.g., program attributes) may influence desired outputs (e.g., results of programs).

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

A neurological and developmental disorder that impacts social interaction, communication, behavior, and learning. Students with ASD often have restricted interests, repetitive behaviors, and challenges with social competence, executive functioning, and independence.

### **High-Functioning Autism (HFA)**

Refers to individuals on the autism spectrum with average or above-average intelligence (IQ above 70) and strong verbal skills, but who may still experience social, communication, and executive functioning challenges.

### **Transition Planning**

A coordinated, outcome-oriented process mandated by IDEA to prepare students with disabilities for life after high school, including education, employment, and independent living.

### **Backward Design**

An instructional framework that begins with desired long-term outcomes and works backward to design programming, instruction, and assessments to achieve those outcomes.

### **Transition Planning Framework (TPF)**

An improvement plan developed in this capstone to provide structured, grade-level programming for students with ASD from late elementary through high school, emphasizing early planning, holistic skills, family engagement, and interagency collaboration.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

A legally mandated plan developed under IDEA that outlines educational goals, supports, and services for a student with disabilities.

**Self-Advocacy**

The ability of students to understand their strengths, challenges, and needs, and to effectively communicate them to access accommodations, supports, and resources.

**Social Competence**

The set of skills required to interact successfully with peers and adults includes communication, relationship-building, self-regulation, and navigating social contexts.

**Executive Functioning**

Cognitive processes such as planning, organization, time management, self-regulation, and problem-solving that are critical for independence and postsecondary success.

**Family-School Partnerships**

Collaborative relationships between families and schools that support student success through shared decision-making, consistent communication, and joint planning.

**Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs)**

Instructional and intervention strategies validated through research as effective for improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Interagency Collaboration**

Partnerships among schools, families, and outside organizations (e.g., vocational rehabilitation, disability services, mental health providers) to support students' transition to adulthood.

**College Persistence**

The continued enrollment and progress toward completing a degree program in higher education.

**Postsecondary Outcomes**

Measures of success after high school including enrollment and persistence in higher education, employment, and independent living.

**STEPS (Stepped Transition in Education Program for Success)**

A structured transition program that provides individualized counseling, immersion experiences, and family-school collaboration to support students with ASD.

**COMPASS (Collaborative Model for Promoting Competence and Success)**

An evidence-based consultation and coaching model for transition planning with ASD students and their families.

**Transitioning Together**

A multi-family psychoeducation program designed to support both students with ASD and their families in transition planning

## Section 1: Introduction

According to the US Department of Education, the Every Student Succeeds Act “requires—for the first time—that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers” (*Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA]* 2024). Given this requirement, schools may need to implement ongoing change to achieve that outcome for every student, as the disparity between groups persists. Currently, students with Autism have the poorest post-secondary outcomes of all students with disabilities, except those with intellectual disabilities (ID) or multiple handicaps (Bouck & Park, 2018; Shattuck et al., 2012). The most recent statistics indicate that only 16% of the estimated 5.5 million adults with ASD are employed full-time (*The History of Autism*, 2024). Less than 20% of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) graduated or were on track to graduate five years after high school (Roux et al., 2015). More startlingly, according to Autism Speaks (2023), the average lifespan of an individual with ASD is 36 years, versus 72 years compared to the general population. As the number of individuals with Autism is growing exponentially, the need to address instructional programming is paramount (*Correction and republication: Prevalence and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years — autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 sites, United States, 2012 2018*).

Autism spectrum disorder is both a neurological and developmental disorder that impacts interactions, communication, behavior, and learning (*American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology*, 2023). Individuals with ASD also demonstrate restricted interests and repetitive behavior. Despite the many facets of this disorder, schools often focus mainly on academics, overlooking the social competence skills, navigating interpersonal relationships,

communicating effectively, and adapting to social norms and expectations, needed for independent living, college, or the workplace.

## **Effects**

The profound effects of inadequate transition planning can be long-lasting and far-reaching. Individuals with ASD experience significantly lower rates of employment and independent living compared to their neurotypical peers and even compared to students with other disabilities. Individuals with ASD are more likely to encounter challenges in college, where the demand for both academic and social competence intensifies. This reality highlights the need for earlier, more comprehensive transition planning that prepares students academically and equips them with the social skills needed for adult life.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2) found that over 66% of young adults with ASD were disengaged in the first two years following high school. They did not transition into school and were not employed. Surprisingly, only 58% of students had transition plans in place by the federally required age of 14 (The federal requirement changed after the study was to age 16.). Furthermore, of those surveyed, 60% indicated that they felt depressed, 45% felt disliked by others, and 48% felt lonely. These statistics may be related to social and community participation following high school. Responses indicated that 25% of respondents were entirely socially isolated, and 33% had no community involvement. This social isolation might be in part attributable to the fact that only 30% held a driver's license or permit (Roux et al., 2015).

## **Contextual History**

Historically, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandated transition planning for all students with disabilities who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to start before

the student turns sixteen, be individualized based on the student's strengths, preferences, and interests, and include opportunities to develop functional skills for work and community life. While this mandate ensures transition planning for students with IEPs, beginning by age sixteen leaves little time for high-performing students with Autism to develop social competence skills. Interestingly, just over half of the states in the US have mandated that transition planning begin by the age of thirteen (Suk et al., 2020). Though this is beneficial to students with IEPs, no mandate exists for students with ASD who have either 504 plans or are educated only in the general education setting. Additionally, IDEA does not include social skills directly in its mandate, leaving the definition of functional skills to individual schools and IEP teams.

Although parents and students are included in the IEP teams and the transition planning process, the role of parents and the functions of families post-high school have only begun to be considered. Rispoli et al. (2023) found that family background, access to services, and student characteristics combine to influence parental expectations of outcomes. In addition to this, the stress of locating services, advocating for children, and planning for the future placed significant emotional and physical stress on the parents, leading to recommendations for family-focused planning. Ishler et al. (2020) found that parents were vital to the utilization of services by individuals with ASD after high school. Parents' educational levels were the most critical factor related to this. Findings indicated that parents' low education levels were ameliorated by training in service systems and advocacy (Taylor et al., 2017). While the findings are significant, their practical applications continue to be lacking for implementation by schools and public health systems.

The lack of practical guides and resources was addressed by the US Department of Education, resulting in a transition guide that was originally published in 2017 and revised in

2020. This publication, *A Transition Guide To Postsecondary Education and Employment For Students and Youth With Disabilities*, does not explicitly address individuals with ASD, but does provide a general overview of considerations, legal definitions, and potential resources for all students with disabilities. Similarly, many colleges and universities began to create their own transition guides to assist students in understanding the resources available, providing templates for requesting accommodations, and navigating some of the challenges of college life. The Organization for Autism Research (2018) took this a step further and created an even more detailed guide, which covers topics such as academics, financial aid, parties, dorms, roommates, and dating. So, while it is evident that more information is available to youth with ASD, the question of the effect remains, as outcomes have remained relatively constant.

In some areas of the transition process, guides are inadequate in developing the understanding and skills individuals need to transition to life after high school. Cai and Richdale (2016) found that students with ASD often did not enact or plan for transition to college, and disclosure of a diagnosis occurred after a significant problem occurred following enrollment. Mulaudzi (2023) concluded that “with the right support and resources, these [college] challenges can be transformed into opportunities for growth and success. By implementing evidence-based strategies, fostering a culture of well-being, and promoting a strong sense of community, educational institutions can pave the way for a positive and fulfilling university experience for their first-year students.” Between 2018 and 2019, 74 programs for students with ASD existed in 29 states in almost exclusively 4-year colleges (Nachman, McDermott, & Cox, 2022), which does little to ameliorate the struggles of students who begin in 2-year colleges or fail to identify.

Navigating the arena of social relationships and the sexual climate of youth is challenging to most young adults, but especially to those with ASD. Before the past couple of decades, youth

with ASD were commonly thought of as asexual. Recent studies (Maggio et al., 2022) found that individuals with ASD have sexual interests similar to those of neurotypical peers. However, deficits in communication, social relationships, and emotional awareness impact the existence and quality of sexual relationships for individuals with ASD. Maggio et al. recommend personalized, contextualized, adequate sexual education to allow individuals with ASD to develop fulfilling relationships. Given that around 70% of all college students are engaging in sexual intercourse, instruction in sex education should not be left out of transition planning (Olsen et al., 2024).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem of practice investigated in this dissertation capstone is that many states provide inadequate post-secondary transition programming and planning for high-performing students with ASD. This programming often begins too late and primarily emphasizes academics, neglecting interventions necessary to develop social competence. As a result, students face poor post-secondary outcomes. This imbalance has resulted in poor postsecondary outcomes for students with ASD, particularly in areas of employment, independent living, and higher education.

This problem is rooted in my experience as a special educator and the observed gaps in current educational practices. Having worked closely with students with ASD for almost 30 years (17 at the high school level), it is clear that a late start to transition planning, combined with a lack of focus on social competence, significantly limits direct success after high school. Surprisingly, this includes the population of “high performing” students I work with, which includes students with ASD taking AP classes, receiving regular high school diplomas, who are involved in social clubs, have GPAs above 3.0, and are accepted into 4-year universities.

Consequently, to address these challenges, policymakers and practitioners must explore how current research highlights the key issues and factors contributing to this problem. The following literature review synthesizes research in three primary areas: identifying post-secondary outcomes for students with ASD, transition factors relating to positive or negative outcomes, and the needed elements for successful transition planning.

### **Purpose Statement**

This capstone dissertation researches current post-secondary transition planning, identifies factors influencing outcomes for students with ASD, examines existing transition models, and aims to create a transition framework for professionals to improve these outcomes for students who choose to pursue college after high school.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions addressed include:

1. What are the post-school experiences of youth with ASD (ages 18-29) regarding college persistence?
2. What positive and negative factors in high school transition planning and programming have been identified in the documented outcomes related to college persistence among youth with ASD?
3. What emerging trends and effective models does research identify for transition planning for high-performing students with ASD?

## **Section 2: Comprehensive Research Review**

### **Methods**

The comprehensive research review is paramount to this capstone dissertation. A systematic literature review was employed to provide a rigorous and transparent method for

synthesizing research, ensuring thorough coverage, minimizing bias, and facilitating reproducibility. The literature review focused on themes relating to the above-mentioned research questions.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusionary factors for this literature review delineated that articles had to meet the following criteria. Articles had to be peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024 that focused on transitioning into college, college persistence, high school transition planning, or high school transition programming. Both qualitative and quantitative group designs were included. For research question one, the articles focused on the transition and college experiences of students with ASD. For research question two, articles focused on the connection between high school transition planning and programming factors related to college outcomes for the same target population of high-functioning students with ASD. For research question 3, articles focused on specific theories or transition programs for high school students with autism and subsequent outcomes. Study participants must have ASD, be between 18 and 29 years old or currently enrolled in post-secondary education, have IQs above 70, and have verbal communication skills. Interventions had to be school-based or school-connected within the community.

Articles excluded from this review also met specific criteria. Dissertations and conference papers were excluded because neither undergoes peer review. Since the focus of this capstone is improving high school-to-college transition planning and programming, exclusionary factors include interventions implemented by researchers only, settings that are not schools, and studies involving nonverbal students or students with intellectual disabilities.

### *Literature Search Procedures*

The research process utilized several methods. Four rounds of literature searches were conducted between March 2024 and June 2024. Primary search tools included Google Scholar, UMD Libraries, Hand searches of articles, and manual electronic searches in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* and *Autism*. The online databases Ed Source, Eric, Teacher Reference Center, Psych & Behavior, Professional Development Collection, APA Psych Info, APA Psych Articles, Psych & Behavior, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were utilized. Advanced search features were set for peer-reviewed articles from 2014 to 2024, and specific keywords. Keywords for the first literature search included “ASD,” “High School Students,” “social communication,” “interventions,” and “high-functioning.” The second literature search utilized the following keywords: “ASD or autism spectrum disorder or autism or autistic,” “high school students, teenagers,” or “secondary schools,” or “adolescents” and “transition.” The third literature search included the following search terms: “College transition or adjustment,” “ASD or Autism spectrum disorder,” and “secondary school or secondary education or high school.” The final literature search utilized the following search terms: “SD or Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorders,” “secondary school,” “college students,” and “student experiences.”

The first search yielded 245 initial entries, which were narrowed down using advanced search parameters of peer-reviewed articles, dates 2014-2024, and full-text availability. After removing duplicates and title search, 42 were screened by abstract, 18 were downloaded and screened by full-text, yielding five included in this review. The second search yielded 186 initial articles, which were narrowed down using the same procedure above, ultimately leaving 12 downloaded for full-text screening. Of those, five were included in this review. The third search yielded 345 initial articles, which were screened using the same procedures as the first two

searches. Ultimately, fifteen articles were downloaded for full-text review, of which three were included in the literature review. The fourth and final search yielded 453 initial articles, which were also screened using the same process as the previous searches, leading to eight articles screened for full text and two included in this review (See Appendix A).

### *Data Extraction*

Content analysis was used to analyze each study to identify recurring themes related to the post-school experiences of youth with ASD, factors in high school planning and programming, and emerging trends in transition planning. Each study was read in detail, and key information was extracted (methods, participants, procedures, results, and conclusions). Sections where the authors describe participants' experiences, report barriers or facilitators to success, and provide recommendations for transition planning were noted. Codes were then assigned to text sections related to the research questions. The codes “college persistence challenges,” “college persistence successes,” “family support,” “transition planning,” “academic supports,” “nonacademic supports,” and “campus fit” were then grouped by similarity into more prominent themes to answer research questions. A cross-case analysis was employed to assess the consistency and uniqueness of the findings. Themes were organized and synthesized under each research question.

## **Post-School Experiences Of Youth With ASD (Ages 18-29) In Regards To College Persistence**

The first topic related to my problem of practice is the post-school experiences of students with ASD. This area of research is relevant as the percentage of the population with ASD is increasing, and more students with ASD are attending some type of post-high school education, yet employment and college persistence are troubling. Since research has identified

that students with ASD have some of the poorest outcomes of all individuals with disabilities, understanding the lived experiences of youth with ASD is critical to understanding what these students need in high school transition planning and programming, as well as identifying valuable insights into gaps in transition planning for students with ASD. Identifying what factors contributed directly to the success or failure of specific students with ASD in post-secondary settings to determine critical skills, processes, and services has only begun to be considered. Without this connection, developing effective programming would be perhaps only a best guess. Ultimately, five articles, both qualitative and quantitative studies, met the inclusionary criteria related to the theme of post-secondary outcomes utilizing the lived experiences and voices of students with ASD (See Appendix B).

In a phenomenological qualitative study focused on the transition experiences of youth with ASD from high school to college, Alverson et al. (2019) collected data from family questionnaires, special education record reviews, and interviews with individuals with ASD (sample size of five adult males, ages 19-22), family members, teachers, and rehabilitation counselors. The data from semi-structured interviews and secondary sources yielded five recurring themes upon analysis: motivation to attend college, high levels of disability awareness, intentional family support, coordinated transition planning, and clear post-school goals (Alverson et al., 2019).

Participants' educational experiences differed widely, but all demonstrated difficulty with social skills, communication skills, and executive functioning. These difficulties manifested in friendships, miscommunications, independence, organization, and routines (Alverson et al., 2019). College experiences differed as well, but all had experience at a community college. Cross-case themes emerged, including self-awareness/disability awareness, source of motivation,

family support/involvement, clear post-school goals, and coordinated transition services. While relevant to each student, students experienced these themes differently. Only three out of five students had similar experiences in relation to an internal source of motivation, a clear post-school goal, and enrollment in community college (Alverson et al., 2019).

Next, a qualitative study by Anderson and Butt (2017) utilized open-ended interviews examining the successes and hurdles of autistic young adults (sample of 14 male and 1 female young adult) at college, and considered areas that could be addressed in high school. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interviews of 18 families who reported a degree-seeking experience for young adults with ASD. It included families with young adults with ASD who left high school within the previous 15 years. The study's findings provided insight into the experiences of young adults with ASD who may no longer be on campus, have graduated, or have dropped out, and examined possible connections between high school support services and college outcomes (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

The results indicated four main themes: Preparation Beyond Academics, Student/College Fit, Campus Supports, and Family Supports. Within these themes, researchers found that high school transition processes needed to be robust and include the student, ASD-related challenges needed to be addressed before transition, and the stress of the student during transition needed to be considered (Anderson & Butt, 2017). They also found that campus size, location, and culture should be considered, student fit should be evaluated, and institutional flexibility and ease should be considered. Campus supports, such as note-takers, extra testing time, additional support, and consideration of limitations, such as self-advocacy to receive support, were essential considerations. Lastly, family support, such as direct intervention and emotional support, could be critical, as well as considering what the young adult would allow parents to do. Researchers

concluded that addressing challenges during high school beyond academics is particularly important to prepare students for college (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

Similarly, another study conducted by Jackson et al. (2017) looked at both academic and nonacademic college experiences of students with ASD. This quantitative study used an online (Qualtrics) survey to better understand the self-reported academic, social, and mental health experiences of 56 post-secondary students with autism, primarily in the US but also in Canada and the UK. The survey collected information related to demographics, ASD diagnosis, ASD symptom severity, academic experiences, social experiences, and mental well-being (Jackson et al., 2017).

In terms of academic experiences, most participants reported being slightly to very comfortable with their academic workload (Jackson et al., 2017). Respondents accessed an average of 2.38 support services while at school, and one-third desired additional or improved services, including social support groups/peer-mentorship programs, career planning/counseling services, more accommodated housing options, and improved counseling/psychological services. Some participants did not use support services, while others used academic advising, academic tutoring, counseling/psychological services, exam accommodations, study skills training, or time management training (Jackson et al., 2017).

Participants overall averaged extremely severe symptom levels of depression and severe levels of stress. Researchers found academic comfort, overall loneliness, and the autism-spectrum quotient were significant predictors of overall emotional distress (Jackson et al., 2017). In their lifetime, 74.6% of respondents experienced some sort of suicidal behavior. 53.6% of respondents reported thinking about suicide in the past year. 17.9% reported that it was likely or very likely that they would attempt suicide within their lifetime. Lifetime suicidal behavior

was significantly linked to the autism-spectrum quotient, number of friends, academic comfort, symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Jackson et al., 2017).

In college preparation, one area of preparation not related to academics, which was also not covered by the previous studies, is disability identification. This step is critical to receiving services post-high school and must be shared by a student with ASD themselves. Cox et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study that gives a unique perspective on the issues faced by students with ASD in post-high school settings (9 students ages 18-50+) who attended, are attending, or may attend postsecondary education utilizing Astin's inputs, environments, and outcomes (I-E-O) conceptual framework. This framework examines how student characteristics at entry (inputs), the educational experiences they encounter (environment), and the resulting changes or achievements (outcomes) interact to shape student development. Students were asked about incidents that shaped their college expectations, experiences, and status using semi-structured interviews. Findings centered around two topics: (1) whether and when to share their autism diagnosis with others, and (2) identity development (Cox et al., 2017).

Researchers found that participants disclosed their diagnosis academically to receive formal accommodations (Cox et al., 2017). Still, with peers, most participants waited until a need existed due to circumstances or issues that arose with peers. Identity development appeared to be related to their diagnosis as well. Researchers rated all of the participants as having ongoing identity development. Those participants diagnosed earlier were more comfortable with themselves and had a more positive sense of identity. However, all participants had some sort of internal tension related to disability and identity. Students navigated these internal tensions, similar to theories regarding ethnicity, race, sexuality, and sexual identity development. Researchers believed students' perceptions of self had been influenced by the perceptions of

others who subscribed to the deficit model of disability. The authors suggested that campuses could promote a strength model instead and make adjustments such as single dorm rooms, peer mentors, and trained resident advisors that could help provide a more inclusive environment (Cox et al., 2017).

Adjustment to college goes beyond the needed inclusive support pointed out by the 2017 studies, though those supports represent the desired facets of students with ASD. In more recent research, Baczewski et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study utilizing national survey data to compare first-year college students on factors affecting adjustment experiences to identify specific needs of students with ASD further. 222 First-year college students, students with ASD (74), neurotypical students (74), and students diagnosed with ADHD (74) were matched on markers of survey year, gender, income, race/ethnicity, frequency of depressive symptoms at the start of first year, and college selectivity. Variables included predictors of college adjustment, such as social self-confidence and intellectual self-confidence, the ability to balance academic and social demands, and ease of making friends. College adjustment outcomes were measured using the following: social–social self-confidence; academic–intellectual self-confidence and academic success; personal/emotional–psychological stress; attachment to the institution–campus satisfaction and sense of belonging (Baczewski et al., 2022).

The results of this study relating to predictive factors of first-year adjustment outcomes for students with ASD showed some significant factors (Baczewski et al., 2022). At the beginning of the year, social self-confidence and ease of making friends were substantial predictors of social self-confidence at the end of the year. Intellectual self-confidence and ease of making friends at the start of the school year were significantly predictive of intellectual self-confidence at the end of the year. Unsurprisingly, intellectual self-confidence and the ability

to balance academic and social demands significantly contributed to first-year GPAs at the beginning of the year. Social self-confidence, ease of making friends, and balancing social and academic demands significantly predicted psychological stress. Lastly, high social self-confidence, greater ease of making friends, and better ability to balance social and academic demands yielded an increased campus sense of belonging and attachment to the institution (Baczewski et al., 2022).

### *Common Themes Across Studies*

The studies in this section illustrated three main categories: challenges, successes, and supports used or wanted in college. Outcomes for students in college included failing, dropping out, having a crisis, and/or succeeding. Factors leading to failure, dropping out, and/or having a crisis were reported to relate to challenges in social skills/communication, as well as factors associated with ASD, executive functioning, self-advocacy, and self-confidence. In some cases, direct family intervention was helpful for continued success and sometimes facilitated a change of environment to end a crisis. Successes were reported as pertaining to academic success, being able to balance academic and social demands, robust high school transition programs that addressed ASD-related challenges before enrollment in college, pre-college visits, and willingness to share disability information to obtain services. Overall, persistence in college is directly related to academic and non-academic factors. While academic ability is one factor leading to success, advocacy, disability, self-awareness, and support designed to consider aspects of ASD, such as individual dorm rooms, time management training, and counseling, were also important factors for success identified by students.

### **Positive And Negative Factors In High School Transition Planning And Programming**

The second section of this literature review addresses the positive and negative factors related to high school transition planning and programming that have been documented through qualitative and quantitative research. While related to the topic of the previous section, the research presented here focuses on high school transition planning and programming needs, based on documented student successes and lessons learned from challenges. To understand what adaptations need to be made to current transition planning, consideration must include the gaps in current transition planning to determine how those might relate to the challenges outlined in the previous section. Again, the majority of research in this section centers on the lived experiences and voices of autistic high school and college students. Understanding factors contributing to success is vital to developing transition planning and programming that will theoretically yield improved outcomes for autistic college students. This section includes four qualitative and one non-experimental quantitative study analyzed to review positive and negative factors in high school transition planning and programming (See Appendix C).

A phenomenological study by Harn et al. (2020) utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews to determine the essence of being an autistic college student (6 male and 1 female) in Southeast Texas. Participants discussed events occurring during or after high school but before entering college. All seven participants had earned a high school diploma and transitioned to a college campus, were academically successful, held a driver's license, and possessed independent living skills. Most received services from a regional vocational rehabilitation center or a university disability resource center. Over half entered a two-year college before transferring to a four-year college or university. One had just graduated from a two-year college and was seeking employment. The remaining participants entered a four-year college or university following high school. Most lived at home with their parents, while one lived on a college

campus. About half either currently worked at a part-time job or had previously (Harn et al., 2020).

Results indicated three major themes and several sub-themes. The major theme, shifting perspective, had three sub-themes: discovering agency, handling new challenges, and empathic leanings (Harn et al., 2020). The theme, motivating factors, had two sub-themes: ASD as an advantage, and paving their own way. The last major theme, 'to socialize or not to socialize,' had no sub-themes. Findings showed that students encountered challenges that empowered them to overcome obstacles, demonstrate empathy towards others experiencing similar challenges, and embrace the advantages of having autism. Participants also demonstrated an understanding of choice related to socializing, as well as utilizing choice in response to circumstances.

Researchers identified the concept of self-determination as the overarching connection between themes related to success in both academic performance and adaptation in college (Harn et al., 2020).

Looking at high school students specifically, Hedges and colleagues (2014) used focus groups to investigate challenges faced by 41 autistic high school students, parents, and their service providers (Hedges et al., 2014). These seven focus groups were conducted in a university community with a population of 55,000 and a mixed rural-urban community of 275,000 within a 60-mile radius of the university community. Coding resulted in three primary themes: inconsistencies, difficulties with interpersonal connections, and knowledge/process breakdowns (Hedges et al., 2014).

Researchers found that inconsistencies are profuse in the lives of high school students. Inconsistencies exist within and across school days, over time, and between home and school environments (Hedges et al., 2014). One recurrent concern was a lack of communication during

transitions to consistently implement goals and accommodations from year to year, especially between middle and high school. In interpersonal communication, challenges were expressed in peer interactions, and a lack of teacher training to facilitate positive growth in peer relationships. Additionally, both teachers and parents experienced struggles in collaborating. Many expressed a sense of inadequate communication due to time and confidentiality restrictions. Finally, in the area of knowledge/process breakdowns, the sub-themes of rules and responsibilities, knowledge and preparation, and special education processes are considered. Participants highlighted the hidden quality of autism and a general lack of understanding of the disability across school systems, including cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and others. They also indicated that the concept of realistic expectations among stakeholders differed between teachers and parents (Hedges et al., 2014).

Realistic expectations can be developed by considering the experiences that individuals have had and how those connect to skill growth. Reis et al. (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study exploring the high school experiences of 40 academically talented college students that enabled them to attend competitive colleges successfully. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and utilized a multiple case study approach to analyze how and why particular situations were successful or unsuccessful for the participants (Reis et al., 2022). Results indicated that most participants had taken advanced or accelerated academic coursework, including AP, honors, or concurrent enrollment courses. Almost all students participated in clubs and sports, though they preferred individual and STEM-related activities. One-third of participants founded clubs that fit their interests (Reis et al., 2022). Half of the participants had been involved in some type of residential program away from home, such as summer camp or programs held over school holidays. Most participants reported that they did not understand their

autism in high school, and for many, this continued into college. Finally, most participants stated that they would learn about time management in high school if they could return and do it again. Some indicated that the summer programs helped them to understand that skill (Reis et al., 2022).

Three themes emerged from the study (Reis et al., 2022). The first was the importance of advanced content, enriched learning opportunities, interest, and choice. This theme was evident as participants discussed the importance of advanced studies and the ability to study further in areas of interest. This same theme was also reflected in the choice of extracurricular activities and the ability to create ones in areas of interest not offered. Students identified that these opportunities helped them to understand their strengths and weaknesses. The second theme that emerged was the ability to connect, compensate, and counteract. When faced with challenges, these successful students could find a reasonable path, figure out how to cope or compensate, and find a new path if necessary. They could engage with support systems to grow with each challenge. The final theme was the intersection of academic talents and ASD. Some students' coursework was easier than expected, allowing them to allocate more time to navigate the more challenging non-academic areas. Most students' understanding of their autism spectrum disorder (ASD) grew throughout high school and continued to develop through college. This enabled the students to use their strengths to address challenges and find solutions (Reis et al., 2022).

While over half of the students in the study conducted by Reis and colleagues (2022) had been identified as academically talented or gifted, Nasamran et al. (2017) analyzed data that had been collected as part of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 using achievement data to focus on 170 students who were higher achieving and not necessarily academically talented. This quantitative study utilized regression analysis to examine which academic and social skills

predict postsecondary success. Results indicated that approximately 60% of the sample achieved postsecondary educational success, 40% experienced employment success, and 15% were considered to be living independently. When controlling for social skills, higher levels of academic achievement were associated with greater postsecondary educational success. Similarly, when academic achievement was held constant, improvements in social skills also led to increased success (Nasamran et al., 2017).

When compared, academic success predicted educational success, but social skill success predicted educational, employment, and independent living success (Nasamran et al., 2017). Researchers suggest that having academic scores in the average range compared to their neurotypical peers predicts the likelihood of enrollment and success in postsecondary education. However, it does not limit the expressed need for adequate social skills instruction in high school (Nasamran et al., 2017).

Many of these studies have looked at high school experiences and predictors of success to the exclusion of the specific transition process from high school to college. When examining enabling factors within the high school that facilitated successful transitions to college, Ressa (2022) interviewed 5 participants who were educated in the United States and received special education services in P-12 schools. Interview questions focused directly on transition plans, services, and participants' specific transitions to college. The themes that emerged included controlling and directing one's personal and educational affairs, conscience, knowledge of one's character and feelings, and standing up for oneself (Ressa, 2022).

Results showed that students managed their personal and academic needs, practiced self-regulation by retaking exams and courses, studying extra hours, and working to improve their grades (Ressa, 2022). Students reported being involved and giving input during their IEP

process, setting high goals, and seeking medical interventions before moving to college.

Participants also noted that college expectations were often set in elementary school and carried through high school. They reported learning that their specific disability may require different academic orientations. Participants also related that their self-awareness helped them participate in planning their future path and cope with lower expectations of them by others, which also assisted with self-advocacy. Lastly, participants acknowledged a desire to acquire skills that would help them pursue a successful career in the future. Finally, inclusion in the general education curriculum and taking state exams increased success post-high school (Ressa, 2022).

### *Common Themes Across Studies*

Common themes across the studies in this section included academic achievement, self-agency, and handling challenges. In terms of academic achievement, inclusion in the general education curriculum and access to honors, Advanced Placement, and/or concurrent college courses were identified as success factors. Academic achievement was viewed as a stronger predictor of college success than academic ability. Students indicated that learning to have self-agency in their approach to learning by retaking tests or courses, changing study routines, and utilizing support systems in high school also facilitated success in college. One common element of these studies was understanding the individual qualities of their disability and their strengths. The inherent inconsistencies of high school itself were a negative factor. Still, students indicated that having an active role in their IEP transition plans and goal setting helped them plan for their future with more certainty and helped them deal with differing expectations of themselves by others.

## **Emerging Trends and Effective Models for Transition Planning**

The third and final section of my literature review explores emerging trends and practical models for transition planning. Much of the literature published around the transition to college among students with ASD focuses on challenges and successes. Little research explicitly targets high school transition planning and programming or standard approaches or practices (Nuske et al., 2019). Articles in this literature review section look at two approaches and three programs developed using current literature, but none include comprehensive or cohesive transition planning (See Appendix D).

The first study in this section by Wei et al. (2015) is a quasi-experimental research study that used propensity score modeling to examine the impact of high school transition planning on college enrollment for students with ASD using a national sample. Researchers utilized data from the *National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (2001-2009)* and specifically examined participation in high school transition planning and goal setting, including having a primary goal of attending college. While this study utilizes data almost two decades old, it is the only national longitudinal transition study that has been conducted to date. Researchers coded responses indicating the level of involvement in transition planning, leadership roles in that planning process, participation in setting goals, services, and discussion. They also considered whether students had attended meetings, though not engaged (Wei et al., 2015).

Findings showed that 40% of respondents actively participated in transition planning, but only 24% of participants stated that college enrollment was a primary transition goal (Wei et al., 2015). College enrollment odds were significantly higher if participants actively participated in transition planning and had attending college as a primary transition goal. Furthermore, these results demonstrate the misalignment of expectations between students and school IEP teams, as

IEPs have documented. Researchers concluded that schools and educators should engage students with early meaningful participation in transition planning, ensure college goals are explicitly reported, and align high school experiences with post-secondary aspirations (Wei et al., 2015).

While college enrollment does not equate with college success, it is the first step a student must achieve to pursue that goal. The second study in this section, by White et al. (2019), is a randomized controlled trial of a program connecting high school transition with college transition, called STEPS (Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students with ASD). This study utilized a random assignment of 59 high school and college students with ASD, ages 16-25, to comparison groups: the STEPS intervention group and the Transition as usual (TAU) control group. STEPS involves two tracks or steps. Step one is for high school students nearing graduation to prepare for adulthood, and step two is for students already enrolled in or preparing for college to adapt to college/adulthood. STEPS utilizes individualized counseling sessions, immersion experiences in college settings, and involvement from parents and school personnel (White et al., 2019).

Results showed high retention rates (about 90%) with over 75% of students and 90% of parents viewing the program as helpful or very helpful. Fidelity to the program was also very high (more than 90%) (White et al., 2019). Students in Step 1 had significantly greater transition readiness than TAU, and those gains were maintained post-intervention. Students in Step 2 showed improved college adjustment during treatment compared to TAU, but demonstrated some regression post-program. Overall, however, improvement in the treatment group was still notable. Researchers also found that ASD severity and behavioral/emotional challenges predicted less sustained progress over time, especially for students in Step 2. Findings also

indicated that higher self-determination and IQ predicted better outcomes, adaptability, and retention of gains (White et al., 2019).

Another group of researchers, Ruble et al. (2019), developed a transition program by adapting a program used with young children, COMPASS (Collaborative Model for Promoting Competence and Success), that had shown success in two randomized controlled trials. This program is manualized, providing in-depth protocols, forms, and case study examples. Using a systematic approach, researchers made adaptations based on stakeholder feedback and organized across five domains: Characteristics of the intervention, Outer setting, Inner setting, Characteristics of the individuals, and Implementation process using the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research. The COMPASS program utilizes a 3-hour parent-teacher consultation, four follow-up coaching sessions with a consultant, and a focus on personalized goal-setting and planning. Researchers conducted a mixed-methods study that utilized stakeholder focus groups and satisfaction surveys (Ruble et al., 2019).

Results showed that teachers, parents, and students rated the intervention highly for all components (Ruble et al., 2019). The teachers additionally found the intervention usable and acceptable with minimal burden. Researchers concluded that the adapted COMPASS aligns with best transition planning practices, addressing a wide range of transition goals that could correspond to postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Strengths were given as including the development of student self-determination and interagency collaboration (Ruble et al., 2019).

The following study in this section, Kuhn et al. (2022), also included sessions for parents and students. This study utilized the intervention, Transitioning Together, a multi-family group psychoeducation program for families with adolescents with ASD. The intervention consists of

two initial family “joining sessions,” and eight 90-minute weekly group sessions (separate for parents and students) covering topics such as transition planning, emotional regulation, communication, independence, family connection, etc. The program was modified for schools to include self-determination activities, flexible delivery, optional credit for participation, and options for cultural adaptation, such as a Spanish-language version. The implementation study was conducted within an extensive randomized controlled trial that formed part of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD initiative, which took place in 17 public high schools across North Carolina, Wisconsin, and California (Kuhn et al., 2022).

Findings showed that schools in higher SES communities were 90% more likely to adopt the program (Kuhn et al., 2022). Other factors that improved adoption included better pre-existing transition and family involvement programming, support from community partners, and the availability of a culturally adapted Spanish version. Implementation fidelity was very high in the majority of schools. Parents were highly satisfied with the program and would recommend it to other parents, highlighting the ease of participation. The direct effectiveness of the program was not evaluated in this study (Kuhn et al., 2022).

The final article in this section is not a research article but a theoretical and conceptual one that argues for a more significant role of school social workers in the transition process for students with ASD or Asperger’s syndrome planning to attend college. This article by Dente and colleagues (2012) uses an ecological approach based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to evaluate transition needs of students with ASD (Dente et al., 2012). Authors argue that the ecological training of school social workers makes them exceptionally equipped to assist in the transition planning and programming by coordinating between families, schools, and colleges, providing case management, advocacy, and emotional support, identifying and

accessing community and college-based services, as well as teaching adaptive coping, self-advocacy, and problem-solving skills (Dente et al., 2012). Using the ecological model, social workers can also help students to recognize transaction points such as conversations with teachers or disability services, manage their energy and social “energy drains,” and identify key interaction points in the environment, such as campus housing or tutoring centers, while navigating the move from dependence to interdependence. The authors recommend that social workers be part of IEP teams for transition planning before senior year and should work to build partnerships between high schools, families, community agencies, and college disability services (Dente et al., 2012).

### *Common Themes Across Studies*

Common themes across the studies in this section include the need for high-quality transition planning to develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills, the need for family-school partnerships and family involvement in transition planning and programming, and, lastly, the need to address navigating changing systems and environments. From including the student, the school social worker, parents, and IEP team members, the transition planning process must be individualized, active, and evolving to include college connections and planning for success.

### **Findings**

The literature reviewed across the three focal areas revealed a cohesive set of factors influencing college persistence and transition outcomes for students with ASD. Key findings clustered around challenges, successes, and support systems within postsecondary experiences, high school transition planning and programming, and emerging transition models. These themes

provide insight into the barriers students face and highlight promising practices and gaps in the existing systems.

### ***Theme 1: Challenges to College Persistence for Students with ASD***

Across studies, students with ASD reported significant challenges in transitioning to college, even when academically capable. These challenges stemmed from difficulties in social skills, executive functioning, and identity development (Alverson et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Cox et al., 2017). Jackson et al. (2017) identified emotional distress, including high rates of depression, stress, and suicidal ideation among college students with ASD. Notably, students often struggled with self-advocacy and disclosing their disability to access support services, leading to limited accommodations and increased psychological distress. These findings demonstrate the disconnect between academic preparation and the broader social-emotional skills needed to persist in college. Many students were unprepared for the level of independence and complexity of navigating college systems and relationships.

### ***Theme 2: Success Factors and Protective Supports***

In contrast to the challenges, several protective factors contributed to positive postsecondary experiences and transitions. Alverson et al. (2019) found that motivation, disability awareness, family involvement, and coordinated transition planning were associated with persistence. Further, campus fit, robust support systems, and family involvement during the transition period itself are essential factors to success in college (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Self-awareness and disability identity development also emerged as key success factors (Cox et al., 2017). Students who understood their strengths and needs were more likely to advocate for accommodations and utilize campus resources. Beczewski et al. (2022) highlighted the role of

self-confidence and social adaptability in predicting academic success, sense of belonging, and reduced stress.

### *Theme 3: High School Programming and Gaps in Transition Planning*

While many students with ASD had difficulties in college, some of those challenges could be traced back to gaps in high school transition planning. Studies revealed inconsistencies in services and communication across school environments (Hedges et al., 2014), limited emphasis on self-determination (Harn et al., 2020), and underdeveloped social skills (Nasamran et al., 2017). For instance, academically talented students often lacked awareness of their autism in high school and developed critical self-management skills later (Reis et al., 2022). However, students who engaged in rigorous academic courses, extracurricular activities, and residential programs requiring some autonomy were better prepared for college demands. Inclusive education, goal-setting, and active IEP participation in developing self-advocacy and future planning should also be considered for effective transition planning (Ressa, 2022).

### *Theme 4: Emerging Models and Practices*

Newly developed and adapted transition programs showed promise in promoting student success. Several practices are considered effective in transition planning. The STEPS and COMPASS programs emphasized self-determination building and stakeholder collaboration (Ruble et al., 2019; White et al., 2021). Wei et al. (2015) demonstrated that active student participation and including the goal of attending college in goal setting significantly increased the possibility of college enrollment. Family-school partnerships and collaboration were identified as another essential component of effective planning and implementation, particularly in the Transitioning Together program (Kuhn et al., 2022). Moreover, Dente and Coles (2012) proposed an ecological framework in which school social workers facilitate transition through

environmental mapping, emotional support, family-community partnerships, and systems navigation.

The reviewed literature clearly shows that self-determination, family involvement, student voice, and institutional support are necessary for successful transitions for students with ASD. Across all studies, the importance of early, individualized, and comprehensive transition planning was emphasized. While students face obstacles, especially related to social and emotional domains, systemic support and targeted preparation can lead to positive outcomes. These findings provide a solid foundation for developing improved transition programming models that are grounded in student voice, partnerships, and inclusive practices.

### **Limitations**

While this capstone provides valuable insights into transition planning for students with ASD, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations are most directly applicable to the literature review in Section 2 yet, they also influence the scope and applicability of the improvement plan in Section 3 and the practitioner product in Section 5.

#### *Limitations of the Literature Review (Section 2)*

The systematic review was restricted to peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024. This restriction ensured that findings were current but may have excluded seminal older research or emerging studies not yet published in peer-reviewed outlets. Dissertations, conference papers, and gray literature were also excluded, potentially limiting the breadth of perspectives. Furthermore, most of the reviewed studies involved relatively small sample sizes, relied heavily on self-reported data, drew from older data sources, or were qualitative in nature, which limits generalizability. In addition, the majority of the studies were conducted in the United States, making it difficult to apply findings to international contexts. Notably, the review

focused only on students with average to above-average cognitive ability and communication skills. While this aligns with the focus of this capstone, it excludes the experiences of nonverbal students and those with co-occurring intellectual disabilities, meaning that the findings are not representative of all students with ASD.

### *Limitations of the Improvement Plan (Section 3)*

The Transition Planning Framework (TPF) was developed by synthesizing existing literature and drawing from professional practice, but has not yet been field tested. While the framework emphasizes early, holistic, and collaborative planning, its successful implementation depends on factors that vary widely across districts, such as staffing, resources, administrative support, and professional development. Schools in under-resourced communities may face significant barriers to adoption. The framework may also require substantial modification or adaptation for culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Additionally, while the framework identifies developmental benchmarks and guiding principles, it cannot capture the full range of individual differences present within the ASD population.

### *Limitations of the Practitioner Product (Section 5)*

The practitioner product developed is intended as a resource for educators, families, and school leaders, but it remains conceptual. Its effectiveness has not yet been validated through pilot studies, field implementation, or longitudinal data collection. The usability of the product depends on buy-in from multiple stakeholders, including families, educators, administrators, and community partners, all of whom may face competing priorities. Adoption fidelity is also a concern: even well-designed tools can fail to achieve their intended impact if they are not implemented consistently or if schools lack the infrastructure to sustain them.

### *Researcher Positionality*

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that this project was shaped by the researcher's professional perspective as a special educator with nearly 30 years of experience. This practitioner lens enriches the work by grounding it in real-world challenges, but also carries the risk of bias. The emphasis on social competence, self-advocacy, and family-school partnerships reflects areas that were observed as critical in practice may not be viewed as priorities in the same way by other researchers.

### *Future Directions*

Recognizing all of these limitations highlights areas for future research and application. Larger-scale, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term impact of early, backward-designed transition planning. Pilot testing of the Transition Planning Framework across diverse school settings would help refine its components and confirm its feasibility. Finally, practitioner products, such as those developed in Section 5, would benefit from iterative testing to ensure accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and practical relevance.

## **Section 3: Plan for Improvement**

Despite academic capability, many high-performing students with ASD continue to demonstrate poor postsecondary outcomes due to inadequacies in transition planning, particularly in the areas of social competence, self-advocacy, and executive functioning (Alverson et al., 2019; Dijkhuis et al., 2016; Ruble et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2015). While efforts have been made to better understand the challenges faced by individuals with ASD in postsecondary settings, improve the transition process, and develop research-based methods to teach necessary skills, each of these areas of research has grown as separate and distinct subjects. In response to these gaps, this section presents a comprehensive and evidence-based

improvement plan designed to restructure how schools prepare students with ASD for life after high school.

Using the backward design approach, this plan begins with a clear vision of successful postsecondary outcomes, including college persistence, meaningful employment, and independent living, and works in reverse to construct a structured pathway that equips students with the social, functional, and academic skills necessary to achieve these outcomes (Childre et al., 2009). The plan is guided by principles of early intervention, individualized supports, and collaboration among schools, families, and community agencies. It draws from emerging best practices and empirical studies reviewed in the previous section, including the importance of fostering self-determination (White et al., 2019), leveraging coordinated services (Ruble et al., 2019), and developing disability identity and advocacy skills (Cox et al., 2017).

This section is organized into several key components: an overview of guiding principles, a grade-by-grade implementation framework spanning late elementary through 12th grade, a description of curriculum and programmatic supports, professional development strategies for staff, and partnership-building with postsecondary institutions and community agencies. It also outlines measurable benchmarks, anticipated outcomes, and implementation timelines.

This plan aims to create an actionable, scalable framework that not only improves the immediate educational experience of students with ASD but also leads to long-term improvements in their quality of life, sense of belonging, and future independence. By centering around the voices of students and families and aligning supports with their evolving needs, the plan seeks to create a proactive, empowering, and outcome-driven transition process.

## **Guiding Principles**

There are six guiding principles for this improvement plan. The first is the inclusion of the student in the IEP and transition planning process. Including the student involves not only a student-centered approach, but more specifically a student-guided approach, as students gain skills and self-awareness throughout the span of their education. Ressa (2022) found that more successful students in college had been directly involved in the transition planning process, goal setting, and participated directly in developing their IEPs. Students interviewed indicated that this allowed them to understand the specific learning needs related to their disability and how they had benefited from some accommodations, such as retaking tests.

The second guiding principle of this improvement plan is the establishment and maintenance of family-school partnerships. Hedges and colleagues (2014) found that a lack of communication during transitions year-to-year, especially between middle and high school, led to inconsistent goal and accommodation implementation. Strong school-family communication is crucial to a successful transition and should be utilized to support the development of student self-advocacy as students progress toward graduation and prepare for the transition to post-secondary environments.

The third guiding principle is the use of evidence-based practices (EBPs). It is essential to utilize research-based methods when seeking to improve current practices because, despite the availability of numerous validated interventions, the gap between research and practice remains a persistent barrier to effective implementation in school settings (Fixsen et al., 2005; Ruble et al., 2019). This disconnect often results in fragmented supports or reliance on anecdotal strategies that lack empirical validation (Ruble et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2015). To address this gap, implementation science emphasizes key principles that are particularly applicable to the context

of transition planning, including contextual fit, ensuring that interventions align with the specific culture, resources, and needs of the school, stakeholder engagement, and sustained professional development (Cox et al., 2017; Fixsen et al., 2005). As research continues to be published and studies evaluated by such sources as the What Works Clearinghouse, ongoing revisions and improvements are needed to meet the needs of students with ASD in an ever-changing environment (What Works Clearinghouse, n.d.).

The fourth guiding principle is early and ongoing planning. When students with ASD attend a 4-year college, they often had a college education set as a goal in elementary school (Ressa, 2022). It is essential, given the need for and nature of social development, self-determination, and the individual characteristics of ASD, that planning for postsecondary transitions starts early and remains ongoing throughout the educational process.

The fifth guiding principle is the inclusion of holistic skill development. Holistic skill development is crucial to minimizing and planning for the pitfalls that students with ASD face before, during, and after postsecondary transition. Students with ASD demonstrate challenges with social skills, communication skills, and executive functioning (Alverson et al., 2019). These difficulties can manifest in friendships, miscommunications, independence, organization, and routines (Cox et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2017; Nasamran et al., 2017). Additionally, students with ASD may struggle with identity awareness and when or how to disclose their disability (Cox et al., 2017). Hence, these challenges need to be addressed before transition, and the stress that the student experiences during transition needs to be considered (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

The last guiding principle is interagency collaboration. Interagency collaboration creates a coordinated effort among educational staff, families, and community-based agencies, ensuring continuity and support across multiple life domains (Flowers et al., 2018; Kohler et al., 2016;

Test et al., 2009). Dente and colleagues (2012) suggested using an ecological model for transitioning with the support of school social workers. Broadening this concept to include school counselors, where social workers are not present in a school system, would allow postsecondary transitions to be viewed in terms of ecological systems and help fill in gaps that may be otherwise overlooked in the development and enactment of transition programming. By engaging agencies, such as vocational rehabilitation, postsecondary disability services, healthcare providers, and mental health providers, transition goals are supported across the whole ecosystem of adolescent to adult life to reduce fragmentation and duplication (Flowers et al., 2018; Test et al., 2009).

### **Transition Planning Framework**

Research consistently emphasized that for students with ASD, the development of self-awareness, self-advocacy, executive functioning, and social competence must begin early to mitigate the cumulative challenges faced during adolescence and transition to adulthood (Hume et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). While federal mandates require transition planning to start no later than age 16 (IDEA), emerging studies advocate for these processes to begin much earlier, ideally in late elementary grades, to foster gradual growth and increased independence over time (Kuhn et al., 2022; Ressa, 2022), connecting researched developmental trajectories of intervention research with transition benchmarks (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2022)

The following transition planning framework outlines a comprehensive, research-based process for supporting students with ASD from late elementary through twelfth grade. This framework is firmly grounded in the guiding principles established within this improvement plan, specifically early and ongoing planning, student-centered practices, family engagement, individualized supports, interagency collaboration, and the application of evidence-based

interventions (See Appendix G). The structure of this framework reflects findings from the literature, underscoring the importance of early intervention (Hume et al., 2017; Ressa, 2022), the essential role of social competence and executive functioning (Nasamran et al., 2017), and the critical nature of fostering self-determination through collaborative family-school partnerships (Kuhn et al., 2022; Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The systematic use of benchmarks and progress monitoring ensures implementation fidelity, facilitates individualized decision-making, and promotes continuous improvement. Benchmarks were identified in the earlier explanation of the transition framework, but are further refined in this section, serving as developmental milestones aligned with student growth and transition readiness. Beginning in late elementary and continuing through twelfth grade, progress monitoring enables school teams to evaluate student development, adjust instruction and supports, and maintain alignment with long-term postsecondary goals. At each grade level, specific benchmarks are evaluated using monitoring practices designed to assess both the implementation of instruction and student acquisition of skills.

### *Late Elementary (Grade 4, 5, or 6)-Early and Ongoing Planning*

Transition planning is initiated in late elementary school, grades 4, 5, or 6, depending on the school system, through intentional activities designed to cultivate early postsecondary aspirations and foster foundational skills in social competence and executive functioning. At this stage, teachers implement strength and interest inventories, facilitate the transition to middle school as a structured process, and intentionally hold IEP transition meetings with representatives from the middle school to ensure alignment of continuity of goals. Parent partnerships are fostered through a carryover of strategies from school to the home (Hampshire, Butera, & Bellini, 2016). These practices are consistent with recommendations from Ressa et al.

(2022) and Hedges et al. (2014) concerning the importance of early goal-setting and structured transitions. Progress during this phase is measured through completed inventories, documented participation in transition-focused activities, teacher checklists, and student self-assessments.

In sixth grade or the first grade of middle school, the emphasis shifts toward reinforcing family-school partnerships through ongoing dialogue and goal refinement informed by updated assessments of student performance. Instruction specifically targets social competencies such as participation in group activities, fostering friendships, and interacting with unfamiliar peers and staff, reflecting communication and friendship needs (Alverson et al., 2019), as well as the underdevelopment of social skills (Nasamran et al., 2017), and factors related to ASD (Jackson et al., 2017). Families are actively engaged through consistent communication, and discussions regarding standardized testing are integrated to align with long-term educational goals (Ressa, 2022). Monitoring tools include family engagement records and teacher observation data.

Progress monitoring in Grades 4 through 6 utilizes both quantitative and qualitative measures to monitor skill growth and adjust both goals and instructional strategies. These measures include developmentally appropriate checklists, interest and strength inventories, student self-assessments, and documentation of participation in transition preparatory activities such as school visits and orientation. Monitoring emphasizes early postsecondary awareness, goal-setting, and foundational executive functioning and social competence skills. Teacher observations and family engagement ensure student needs and family input are addressed early in the planning process.

## ***Grade 7: Advancing Social Understanding and Identity Development- Holistic Skill Development***

By seventh grade, the framework emphasizes the advancement of students' social understanding through explicit instruction focused on relationships (including sexual education and dating as indicated by readiness), participation in extracurricular activities, and the introduction of self-advocacy strategies. Self-advocacy instruction should include a basic understanding of the IEP, disability, and accommodations, which should be instructed using a strength-based, student-centered model. These initiatives emphasize holistic skill development (Kuhn et al., 2022), relationship building (Alverson et al., 2019), and identity development (Cox et al., 2017). Benchmarks for this year include increased involvement in structured groups and enhanced social interactions, with progress tracked through observation rubrics, participation records, and reflective student feedback.

Seventh grade builds on the foundation established in grades 4-6 by incorporating progress tracking focused on social skill development, peer relationships, and the introduction of self-advocacy skills. Data collection includes both quantitative and qualitative measures that comprise participation records in structured activities, student reflection journals, and teacher-evaluated rubrics across settings for communication and collaboration, providing evidence of student engagement and allowing for the adjustment of IEP goals using a strength-based focus.

## ***Grade 8: Laying the Groundwork–Student Guided Approach***

Eighth-grade transition programming focuses on clarifying student strengths, preferences, and challenges through formal and informal assessments. Students complete interest inventories

and a transition readiness assessment, such as the one developed by Elias et al. (2022), to serve as a baseline for future planning. Using that information, as well as assessments of present levels of performance in the areas of social skills, social interaction, holistic strengths, and executive functioning skills, as well as academics, a formal transition plan should be created as part of the IEP. Transition to high school should not be left until the very end of the year. Instead, it should be specifically planned and mirrored to some degree the transition from elementary school to middle school, including a site visit, orientation, IEP review, support to transfer parent-school partnerships, casemanager to casemanager collaboration, and teacher introductions whenever possible (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Benchmarks include clearly documented transition goals and feedback from participation in preparatory activities.

Eighth grade incorporates formal transition assessments such as the Transition Readiness Assessment (Elias et al., 2022) to establish a baseline for high school transition planning. Progress is monitored using both qualitative and quantitative measures, including inventories, transition planning worksheets, feedback from orientation and site visit participation, and the presence of well-defined, student-informed IEP goals connected to a formal transition plan as part of the IEP. This data ensures that planning is student-centered, reflecting the evolving strengths, skills, and interests of each student.

### ***Grade 9: Building Intentional Foundations—Goal Setting and Skill Development***

Upon entering high school, ninth grade focuses on establishing intentional foundations through systematic monitoring of progress, deliberate goal-setting, and necessary adjustments of supports. Emphasis is placed on helping students navigate school systems and evaluate academic workloads to ensure alignment with postsecondary objectives. This emphasis on the development of social competence and self-determination reflects Ruble et al. (2019) and the necessity of

structured, ongoing support. Benchmarks include regular progress reviews, self-assessments, and qualitative feedback from teachers as well as parents.

Ninth grade emphasizes executive functioning development with benchmarks monitored and measured through student-led progress reviews, self-monitoring tools, and structured student reflections. Progress is measured using both qualitative and quantitative measures, with consistent documentation and collaboration reviewed by teachers, students, and families.

### *Grade 10: Exploration and Real-World Exposure*

Tenth grade expands opportunities for real-world learning through structured experiences such as college campus visits, peer mentoring, and summer programs that encourage autonomy (Alverson et al., 2019). Instruction during this phase incorporates training on social relationships (including intimate relationships and dating), as well as the complexities of disability disclosure (Cox et al. 2017). Emphasis should be placed on the development of self-reliance and the experience of managing social factors independently. Benchmarks include participation logs, student reflections, and qualitative feedback from teachers as well as parents.

Tenth grade builds on student independence by emphasizing autonomy development, developing and maintaining social relationships tracked through qualitative and quantitative measures, including documentation of participation in college and career exploration activities, reflection logs from disability disclosure workshops, and evaluation of self-reliance in now or unfamiliar settings. Observation protocols and mentor feedback forms are used to assess student readiness for increasing independence.

### ***Grade 11: Refinement and Autonomy Development***

Eleventh grade continues to build on real-world learning through a continued development of autonomy through summer programs, community programs, and the refinement of extracurricular activities (Alverson et al., 2019). Educational programming continues with an emphasis on rigorous academic courses, increased self-advocacy, and a well-developed understanding of needed individual accommodations. Additionally, students refine their future plans through student-led IEP meetings, completing Postsecondary Transition Portfolios, interagency collaboration, and parent transition workshops. Direct engagement with disability services within the community and at potential colleges further enables readiness (Anderson et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2015). Benchmarks include completion of transition portfolios, active participation in planning meetings and parent workshops, with documentation of portfolio reviews and service engagement logs.

Eleventh grade focuses on the refinement of autonomy development, with progress monitored using qualitative and quantitative measures by student-led IEPs, development of Postsecondary Transition Portfolios, and documented community agency engagement as primary data sources. Adjustments to instruction and supports should demonstrate a fading to independence trend with an increase in the student's ability to articulate goals independently, request supports, establish and maintain social relationships, problem solve, include evaluating actions and facing failures, and manage multi-step planning processes (Bonete et al., 2014).

### ***Grade 12: Activation and Transition Execution***

Finally, twelfth grade is dedicated to activating transition plans through formal conferences, finalizing applications, and educating students on wellness resources (Jackson et al., 2017; White et al., 2021). Responsibility of transition support shifts from school personnel to

parents, students, community-engaged service providers, and campus resources (upon acceptance). Benchmarks are assessed through documented postsecondary plans, completed application processes, documented engagement of community services, and follow-up data gathered from exit surveys and documentation audits.

Twelfth grade centers around the ultimate goal of transitioning successfully to postsecondary environments. Transition activation is monitored using qualitative and quantitative measures, including exit surveys, finalized application records, service registration documents, community agency enrollment, and family feedback.

Systematic and programmatic monitoring includes post-graduation tracking. Quantitative measures are utilized to measure objective indicators of postsecondary success. These measures include tracking postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates for both students with ASD who participated in the transition planning framework and those who did not receive services through its utilization. Enrollment and use of college and community disability support services will be tracked as well to provide a measure of accessibility of services and self-advocacy. GPA comparisons before and after implementation of the transition framework between groups will provide measures of academic stability and growth. Finally, employment and independent living data will be compiled at the end of the first, third, and fifth years following graduation to evaluate longitudinal functional outcomes. Quantitative measures are employed to provide insight into individual experiences and stakeholder perceptions. Case studies of individual students will provide an understanding and illustration of diverse pathways, contextualize quantitative data, and demonstrate general trends that may be specific to a system. Family and student satisfaction surveys will assess perceived usefulness, effectiveness, and accessibility of program supports. Focus groups with staff, mentors, and community partners will

help to illuminate strengths and areas for improvement in staff development, program delivery, and program structure.

This combination of quantitative and qualitative measures will be employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition planning framework, allowing for ongoing refinement. These measures will provide an assessment of both short and long-term student outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, and fidelity of implementation.

### **Core Components of Implementation**

Effective implementation and sustainment of this transition framework requires a cohesive, multifaceted approach that combines instructional programming, staff training and capacity building, sustained family engagement, and partnerships with community agencies and/or postsecondary institutions. These practices must be addressed and maintained across educational settings, extending into postsecondary environments through partnerships and family engagement for continuity and long-term success. The core components of curriculum and program elements, staff development, family collaboration, and postsecondary and community partnerships utilize research-based methods. They are designed to address the developmental and functional needs of high-performing students with ASD.

### ***Curriculum and Program Elements***

Implementation of the transition framework must include intentional design and delivery of evidence-based curriculum that is embedded in regular instructional routines and aligns with IEP goals. Social competence curricula such as *Teaching Theory of Mind: A Curriculum for Teaching Children With High Functioning Autism* for children ages 7 to 16 (Lecheler et al., 2020), and/or *the Social Competence Intervention-Adolescent* (SCI-A) (White et al., 202), and/or

COMPASS-based instruction (Ruble et al., 2019) can be sequenced for students requiring some or all of the social skills addressed by each to cover all grade levels included in the transition framework. For students requiring targeted skill development, executive functioning coaching is essential to promote independent task initiation, time management, and organizational skills beginning as early as late elementary and culminating in grade 10. (Kenworthy et al., 2014). Additionally, structured lessons and role-playing exercises in disability disclosure and requesting accommodations are recommended to prepare students for postsecondary educational and workplace environments, which are primarily addressed in grade 10 (Cox et al., 2017; Reis et al., 2022).

Peer mentorship programs offer scaffolded learning and naturalistic opportunities to support social learning beginning in grade 9 with school orientation and extending through grade 12 with summer bridge or new student orientation programs at colleges. Students who experience positive peer relationships are more likely to develop meaningful social relationships and maintain engagement in school-based activities (Alverson et al., 2019; Feeney & Burke, 2021). Embedding these mentorship opportunities within overnight school fieldtrips, summer programs, or career practicum programs allows for supervised naturalistic experiences. Awareness of these opportunities could be included in Parent Transition Education Nights at key transition points such as 5th, 8th, or 11th grade to educate families about the IEP transition process, potential future opportunities, college and career pathways, and available community resources.

### ***Staff Training and Capacity Building***

Systematic professional development is essential for fostering realistic expectations, ensuring the consistent application of strategies, and providing social learning opportunities

across various settings (Hedges et al., 2014; Hume et al., 2017; Stokes et al., 2016). Professional development should not be limited to special education teachers but must include general education teachers, school social workers, counselors, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. Topics for training should consist of transition-specific instructional practices, IEP development, and ASD-informed supports. Training should be ongoing, with built-in reflection, and include coaching on developing transition goals that align with student transition goals and long-term outcomes (Ruble et al., 2019).

The school social worker and/or the school counselor can function in a vital role on the transition team by facilitating collaboration between school staff and outside agencies, guiding families through outside or postsecondary service navigation, and monitoring student wellness (Dente et al., 2012). Collaboration with local agencies such as disability support service offices or vocational rehabilitation offices can help bridge the postsecondary transition and focus IEP goals on needed skills and target behaviors, as well as college accommodation procedures (Wei et al., 2015).

### *Family Engagement Strategies*

Family engagement and support are critical components to successful postsecondary transitions and, as such, are a necessary component of successful transition planning (Harn et al., 2020; Kuhn et al., 2022). One evidence-based model is the Transitioning Together family-centered intervention model, which has been found to increase parent efficacy, reduce transition-related stress, and support shared goal development and should be part of the high school programming (Smith et al., 2012; Kuhn et al., 2022).

Cultural Responsiveness should be a foundational component of family engagement. Professional attitudes, diversity concerns, contextual barriers, and bureaucratic barriers were

cited as obstacles to the family involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse families in transition planning as early as 2005 (Kim, & Morningstar, 2005). Barriers to family engagement can be minimized through the provision of resource navigation support, interpretation services, and translated materials to ensure equitable access to information while promoting an inclusive environment (Kuhn et al., 2022).

### *Postsecondary and Community Partnerships*

The final component essential to implementing the transition framework is the intentional collaboration with postsecondary institutions and community partners to bridge transition supports beyond high school. These partnerships provide structure and help align high school instruction with the reality of postsecondary environments, as well as preparing families for the support role after graduation (Alverson et al., 2019).

Collaboration with local colleges and universities, often through disability services, enables students to engage early in the process of requesting accommodations, understanding disability documentation protocols, and developing self-advocacy skills necessary to navigate college systems independently. Early and repeated exposure to postsecondary resources, environments, and requirements is essential for postsecondary success (Wei et al., 2015).

Vocational rehabilitation services may be equally beneficial in providing work-based learning opportunities such as job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, and internships. Programs such as Job Corps provide experiences that promote autonomy, informed decision-making, and future career pathways (*Job Corps*, n.d.), consistent with the findings of Anderson and Butt (2017).

Community mental health and social services may contribute vital support and address and minimize mental health needs such as emotional distress, depression, transition stress, and

suicidal ideation that are common among college students with ASD (Baczewski et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2017). School social workers or counselors can assist students and families with engaging services and identifying potential matching services within a future collegiate environment.

School districts should develop memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or collaborative agreements that define roles and responsibilities, along with communication strategies to formalize and sustain interagency partnerships. Integrated support networks encourage the transfer of support services to postsecondary providers upon termination of high school supports.

By implementation of the core components discussed above, the transition framework becomes a sustainable and student-centered guide to successful postsecondary outcomes for students with high-functioning ASD. The integration of research-based curriculum elements, strengthened educator capacities, authentic family-school partnerships, and intentional student connections with postsecondary and community partners will help schools create cohesive and developmentally responsive infrastructures.

### *Monitoring Tools Overview*

As indicated above, a variety of tools are used across grade levels to monitor student progress and ensure transition-related instruction that is both individualized and developmentally appropriate. The tools utilized were selected based on their alignment with benchmarks and their ability to inform instructional decisions, goal refinement, and support continuity. Both formal and informal assessments are utilized to provide a comprehensive evaluation of necessary skills, independence, and readiness for transition activities. The tools also incorporate raters from across settings, including parents, students, special educators, and general educators, as well as logs documenting important transition preparatory activities.

### *Progress Review*

Monitoring occurs at both the individual and system levels. Individual student progress is evaluated quarterly, and IEP teams meet at least annually to assess progress, adjust goals, and adapt instruction. Transition teams meet quarterly to review aggregated data to monitor program fidelity and identify areas for improvement. The review process is cyclical as an integral component of student-driven, responsive transition planning.

### *Anticipated Outcomes*

Anticipated outcomes of implementing the transition planning framework based on existing research on early and structured transition planning include higher college enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates. Additionally, improvements in social, self-advocacy, and identity development will occur due to the embedded instruction within the framework as measured by self-reflections, rubrics, and IEP participation data. Longitudinally, higher employment rates and job persistence, along with increased independent living arrangements, will demonstrate greater postsecondary success. Finally, improved IEP participation and student-led planning will highlight the connection between the framework and the improved outcomes.

### **Implementation Timeline**

The implementation timeline for a district should follow some variation of the following timeline (See Appendix G): Year Zero is a planning year, which includes staff training, resource development, and pilot site selection. Year One is the initial rollout with implementation in grades 5-6 and 8-9, including resource evaluation. Year Two includes expansion, adding grades 7 and 10, including stakeholder feedback and refinement. Year Three is focused on the full scope

and includes grades 4-12 with the complete model in place. Years 4-5 are monitoring years focused on data analysis, stakeholder reports, and long-term planning.

Overall, this improvement plan incorporates early, comprehensive, and research-informed practices that address challenges of high-performing students with ASD as they transition to postsecondary life. With structured supports, active stakeholder engagement, data-driven refinement, and a student-centered approach, this plan presents a sustainable process to provide targeted instruction leading to improved student outcomes for this population.

## **Section 4: Summary of Results**

### **Synthesis of the Problem**

The problem identified in this study is not that high-performing students with ASD lack the intellectual ability to succeed in higher education, but that the systems designed to support them often fail to provide the full range of preparation they need. As described in Section 2, research consistently shows that many of these students complete high school with strong grades and acceptance into college, yet their persistence rates remain low. The disconnect lies in the difference between academic readiness and the broader skills needed to navigate postsecondary settings. Difficulties in social competence, executive functioning, and disability identity, along with inconsistent self-advocacy, contribute to poor outcomes even when academic ability is not in question (Alverson et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Cox et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2017).

The three research questions guiding this study converge on the same conclusion. First, students' lived experiences in college reveal persistent struggles in social and emotional areas that interfere with their ability to persist, with several studies documenting not only academic

obstacles but also high rates of stress, anxiety, and isolation (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Baczewski et al., 2022; Harn et al., 2020). Second, transition planning in high school is often focused on course schedules and graduation requirements rather than on building independence, advocacy, and social skills (Hedges et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2021). Third, while promising practices and models exist, they remain fragmented and are not consistently implemented across schools (Ruble et al., 2019; White et al., 2019). Taken together, these findings highlight a systemic problem: despite policy mandates, transition planning often begins too late, prioritizes compliance over growth, and lacks the coordination needed to support long-term success.

### **Expected Impact of Improvement Initiatives**

The Transition Planning Framework (TPF) developed in Section 3 responds directly to the challenges identified in Section 2. Using a backward design process, it begins with the outcomes that matter most—college persistence, employment, and independent living—then maps out the steps needed to build toward those outcomes starting in late elementary school. This design shifts transition planning from a compliance exercise into a long-term developmental pathway.

The TPF is expected to have several layers of impact. It addresses the persistence challenges described in Section 2 by embedding instruction in executive functioning, social competence, and self-advocacy—areas most closely associated with attrition (Nasamran et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Rather than being introduced as isolated skills, these areas are woven into the broader academic and extracurricular experiences so that by the time students reach college, they are better prepared to manage daily demands, form connections, and request support when needed.

The framework also builds on protective factors identified in the literature, including motivation, disability awareness, and family involvement (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Bouck & Park, 2018; Cox et al., 2017). By formalizing family-school partnerships and helping students develop a clear understanding of their strengths and needs, the TPF ensures that advocacy becomes an expected and normalized part of the transition process. This approach is consistent with findings that students with clear postsecondary goals and supportive networks are far more likely to persist (Bouck & Park, 2018; Shattuck et al., 2012).

The TPF also responds to the programming goals described in Section 2 by ensuring students have access to authentic practice opportunities. These include internships, campus visits, and structured community experiences that extend learning beyond the classroom. Students who engage in such experiences are better positioned to bridge the gap between academic success and functional readiness for adulthood (Reis et al., 2022; Wolstencroft et al., 2018).

Finally, the framework integrates and builds upon the strengths of existing models, such as STEPS, COMPASS, and Transitioning Together (Kuhn et al., 2022; Ruble et al., 2019; White et al., 2019). Each of these programs has demonstrated promise, but none alone provides a comprehensive, scalable framework. The TPF draws on some of the programs' strongest elements—counseling, collaboration, and structured family engagement—while embedding them into a broader structure designed for sustainability over time. The inclusion of ecological perspectives further strengthens the sustainability by ensuring that the framework is not limited to schools but extends to partnerships with community and vocational agencies (Dente & Coles, 2012; Kohler et al., 2016).

In the short term, this approach is expected to result in greater student involvement in IEP meetings, earlier development of key skills, and improved communication between families and

schools. Over the medium term, students should experience smoother adjustments to college, higher utilization of available services, and stronger persistence into the second year. Over the long term, the expectation is higher rates of college completion, more stable employment, and increased independence. In this way, the framework addresses not only individual student outcomes but also the broader societal costs of underemployment and dependency among young adults with ASD (Billstedt et al., 2010; Yamamoto & Alverson, 2022).

### **Critical Analysis of Next Steps**

While the TPF provides a structured response to the problems identified in Section 2, additional steps are needed to ensure effective implementation and sustainability. At the policy level, federal guidelines currently require transition planning to begin by age 16, although some states have lowered the threshold to 13. As the research reviewed in Section 2 demonstrates, this is often too late (Ressa, 2022; Wei et al., 2015). Policymakers should consider requiring formal transition planning to begin in middle school, with explicit goals addressing social competence, executive functioning, and advocacy skills. Further, eligibility for structured transition planning should extend beyond students served through IDEA to include those with Section 504 plans, who often face similar challenges without comparable support (Hume et al., 2017).

At the school and district level, professional development is a critical next step. Educators and counselors need training not only in evidence-based practices but also in integrating those practices into the daily routines of instruction and extracurricular activities (Flowers et al., 2018; Stichter et al., 2019). Districts should also expand partnerships with community agencies, higher education institutions, and employers to provide authentic learning opportunities and larger transition networks for all students with disabilities (Bumble et al., 2021). Equity must remain a guiding principle, as access to such opportunities can vary widely

depending on a student's socioeconomic background or the resources of the school they attend (Flowers et al., 2018).

Further research is also needed to evaluate the long-term impact of backward-designed frameworks like the TPF. Most current studies measure outcomes such as enrollment or short-term adjustment; far fewer examine persistence, graduation, or post-college employment. Future studies should also consider how frameworks may need to be adapted for culturally diverse populations or for students with varying levels of support needs (Adreon & Durocher, 2007), a concern raised more than a decade ago and confirmed by more recent findings documenting high rates of stress and adjustment challenges (Baczewski et al., 2022; Jackson et al, 2017). Additionally, the experiences of students supported under IDEA compared to those served through Section 504 warrant closer investigation, as differences in service provision may significantly impact outcomes.

Implementation will not be without challenges. Many schools face resource constraints, and sustained interagency collaboration is notoriously tricky. Some educators may resist a shift toward more student-led planning, viewing it as an additional burden. These realities underscore the importance of phased implementation, clear leadership support, and ongoing evaluation and assessment. Without these supports, even well-designed frameworks may struggle to take hold.

Despite these challenges, the urgency of the problem makes inaction unacceptable. Students with ASD are capable of achieving success in higher education and adulthood, but current systems too often limit their opportunities. The TPF offers one practical pathway forward, grounded in research and designed to be adaptable to diverse contexts. The critical next step is to move from identifying solutions to implementing them.

The findings of this study demonstrate that poor postsecondary outcomes for students with ASD are not the result of limited intellectual capacity but of systemic shortcomings in transition planning. Section 2 showed that academic preparation alone is insufficient; students need support in developing social, executive, and advocacy skills. Section 3 introduced the TPF as a direct response to those findings, offering a comprehensive structure built on backward design. This section, Section 4, synthesizes the evidence to show how the TPF can improve outcomes and identifies policy, practice, and research steps necessary to extend its impact.

Ultimately, the challenge is not determining whether change is needed but committing to enacting it. High-performing students with ASD possess the capacity to succeed in higher education, but success will depend on whether schools, families, and policymakers align their efforts around comprehensive transition planning. The work of Section 5 will extend this synthesis into a practitioner-focused article, translating the research findings and proposed framework into practical guidance for those who directly support students and families during the transition process.

## **Section 5: Product for Practitioners**

### **Introduction: Practitioner Article–Bridging the Gap**

Section 5 of this capstone presents a practitioner-oriented article entitled “Bridging the Gap: Developing Social Competence in Elementary Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to Support Postsecondary Outcomes.” This article addresses a critical component of transition planning: the early, explicit instruction of social competence for students with ASD beginning in the elementary years. While transition planning is most often associated with secondary education, a growing body of research supports the conclusion that essential skills needed for postsecondary success must be introduced well before formal transition planning (Hedges et al., 2014; Ressa, 2022). For students with ASD, particularly those without multiple disabilities, postsecondary outcomes remain among the poorest of all individuals with disabilities (Bouck & Park, 2018; Shattuck et al., 2012). These outcomes are not typically a result of academic ability, but instead persistent challenges in social communication, executive functioning, and self-advocacy skills (Wei et al., 2015).

The article focuses on the elementary grades of fourth through sixth, which represent a pivotal period in the development of foundational skills that support later independence. During this developmental stage, students start to navigate more complex social environments, peer relationships, and academic expectations. For students with ASD, this stage may reinforce gaps in social functioning if instruction is not intentionally scaffolded and consistent with applied behavioral analysis, clinical services, speech and language services, or mental health services. However, this stage presents a vital opportunity to introduce and reinforce social-emotional and executive functioning skills before they become limiting factors in secondary school and beyond (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Greer & Ross, 2004; Perryman et al., 2020).

Recent evidence strengthens this rationale. Wolstencroft et al. (2018), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of group social skills interventions for children with ASD, found that all reviewed interventions significantly improved social communication skills and also reduced restrictive, repetitive behaviors despite differences in the specific social skill domains taught. This suggests that multiple research-based approaches can yield positive outcomes when implemented systematically. For this reason, the framework presented in this article aligns its developmental benchmarks with widely used, standardized instructional programs such as Socially Savvy, Zones of Regulation, Skillstreaming, and Unstuck & On Target, as well as with standardized assessments like the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP), Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills-Revised (ABLLS-R), Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS) and Socially Savvy Assessment. This alignment enables educators to implement the framework using tools they may already have access to in their districts, thereby increasing feasibility, promoting consistent progress monitoring, and facilitating outcome comparisons across classrooms and schools.

Additionally, research on instructional grouping for students with ASD indicates that the composition and group size can influence the quality and generalization of skill acquisition. Findings suggest that strategically grouping students by shared skill needs, while ensuring opportunities for interaction with neurotypical peers, can maximize both targeted instruction and social learning opportunities (Stichter et al., 2019). Within this framework, grouping decisions are designed to balance homogeneity or instructional focus with heterogeneity for authentic peer interaction.

The purpose of this article for practitioners is to provide elementary special educators, individualized education program (IEP) teams, and school-based service providers with a

structured, developmentally appropriate framework for embedding social competence instruction into everyday classroom instruction and IEPs. Rather than deferring instruction in peer interaction, collaboration, or early advocacy until middle or high school, this framework offers practical strategies and progress monitoring tools that support the integration of these skills into elementary-level programming. Key areas of focus include:

- Identifying personal strengths and interests
- Participating in structured peer interactions
- Following multistep routines and directions
- Requesting help when needed
- Beginning to understand the function and purpose of supports such as IEP accommodations

Although elementary IEPs do not typically include formal transition language, this article argues that early transition-aligned instruction is both appropriate and essential, and can be effectively integrated into IEP goals for social-emotional learning, pragmatic language development, and behavioral regulation. By including instruction in the area of social competence, teachers can better prepare students with ASD to engage meaningfully and actively participate in classroom activities while building skills for future engagement in transition planning and postsecondary goal setting. Additionally, the framework supports collaborative planning and instruction, integrating related services such as speech and language therapy, counseling, and applied behavior analysis. This cross-disciplinary integration ensures that both the “what” (specific social behaviors) and the “how” (underlying cognitive and self-regulatory processes) are addressed, giving students multiple pathways to acquire and generalize social competency skills.

## **Goals of the Article**

The goals of the article are:

1. To present a research-based framework that incorporates social competence benchmarks into IEP development and elementary instruction.
2. To provide practitioners with guidelines for developing social competence of students with ASD in grades 4–6 aligned with long-term transition planning and programming.
3. To provide concrete, actionable tools and resource references such as checklists, rubrics, and reflection prompts that practitioners can use to monitor progress and inform instruction.

By helping practitioners bridge the gap between compliance-driven, late-stage transition planning and current research demonstrating long-term benefits of early experiential learning, this article contributes to a broader understanding of transition programming for students with ASD.

## Appendix A: Literature Search Summary

Table A1 provides a summary of the four systematic literature searches conducted between March and June 2024. These searches focused on identifying peer-reviewed studies related to transition planning and postsecondary outcomes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Each search applied specific databases, keywords, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. The screening process is detailed below.

| <b>Search Component</b> | <b>Search 1</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Search 2</b>                                                                                                                           | <b>Search 3</b>                                                                                                          | <b>Search 4</b>                                                                                     |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Search Engines          | UMD Libraries                                                                                                        | UMD Libraries                                                                                                                             | Google Scholar                                                                                                           | UMD Libraries                                                                                       |
| Databases               | Ed Source, Eric, Teacher Ref Center, Psych & Behavioral Sciences, Prof Dev Coll., APA Psych Info, APA Psych Articles | Eric, APA Psych Articles, Psych & Behavior, APA Psych Info, Teacher Ref Center                                                            | Google Scholar                                                                                                           | JSTOR                                                                                               |
| Search Terms            | ASD, High School Students, social communication, interventions, high-functioning                                     | ASD or autism spectrum disorder, or autism or autistic, high school students, teenagers, or secondary schools, or adolescents, Transition | College transition or adjustment, ASD or Autism spectrum disorder, secondary school, secondary education, or high school | ASD or Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorders, secondary school, college students, student experiences |
| Inclusionary Criteria   | Peer reviewed, 2014–2024, Ages 18–29, academic journals, English                                                     | Peer reviewed, 2014–2024, Ages 18–29, academic journals, English                                                                          | Peer reviewed, 2014–2024, Ages 18–29, academic journals, English                                                         | Peer reviewed, 2014–2024, Ages 18–29, academic journals, English                                    |
| Exclusionary Criteria   | Age, setting, transition-focused, multiple disabilities                                                              | Age, setting, transition-focused, multiple disabilities                                                                                   | Age, setting, transition-focused, multiple disabilities                                                                  | Age, setting, transition-focused, multiple disabilities                                             |
| Identified              | 245                                                                                                                  | 453                                                                                                                                       | 345                                                                                                                      | 453                                                                                                 |
| Screened with Limiters  | 182                                                                                                                  | 186                                                                                                                                       | 193                                                                                                                      | 256                                                                                                 |
| Duplicates Removed      | 134                                                                                                                  | 150                                                                                                                                       | 151                                                                                                                      | 201                                                                                                 |

|                      |    |    |    |     |
|----------------------|----|----|----|-----|
| Screened by Title    | 57 | 42 | 39 | 173 |
| Screened by Abstract | 42 | 35 | 20 | 41  |
| Full Text Screened   | 18 | 12 | 15 | 8   |
| Included             | 5  | 5  | 3  | 2   |

## Appendix B: Literature Review Summary Addressing Topic 1

| <b>Post-School Experiences Of Youth With ASD (Ages 18-29) In Regards To College Persistence</b> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Authors                                                                                         | Study Description                                                                                                                                                                                              | Proposed Solution                                                                                                                | Research Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Sample Participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Procedures                                                                                                                                        | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Alverson Lindstrom & Hirano (2019).                                                             | To identify the unique personal and contextual barriers young adults with ASD face in postsecondary education, and what high school transition services youth need to be prepared for postsecondary education. | Include social skills, communication, and executive functioning skill instruction as part of transition planning in high school. | Research Question 1: What high school transition services do young adults with AS need to be successful in college? Research Question 2: What unique personal and contextual barriers do these individuals face when enrolling and remaining in college? | Young adults with a medical diagnosis of ASD<br>Five young men, ages 19 to 22, in urban, suburban, and rural areas of a northwestern state. Four Caucasians and one of multiple races. All had a high school completion document at the time of the first interview | interviews with young adults, family members, teachers, and rehabilitation counselors, family background questionnaire, special education records | All five participants enrolled in college with varying degrees of success. Participants identified multiple challenges, especially in the areas of social skills, communication, and executive functioning skills. These challenges were evident in high school and persisted into college settings |

**Post-School Experiences Of Youth With ASD (Ages 18-29) In Regards To College Persistence**

| Authors                 | Study Description                                                                                                                                                                                          | Proposed Solution                                                                     | Research Questions                                                                                                                     | Sample Participants               | Procedures                                                                                           | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anderson & Butt (2017). | Qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 families reporting a degree-seeking college experience for their young adult with ASD. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. | When transition planning, consider college fit, family supports, and campus supports. | What are the broad experiences surrounding college for students with ASD? What specific issues relate to success or failure on campus? | 14 Male and 4 Female Young Adults | Open-ended, unstructured interviews of young adults and parents, using constant comparative analysis | Four completed a Bachelor's degree; nine were attending a 2 or 4-year college, two dropped out of a community college and were working part-time jobs; and three were forced to return home after suffering a crisis while living at college. Four main themes emerging: Preparation Beyond Academics, Student/College Fit, Campus Supports, and Family Supports |

**Post-School Experiences Of Youth With ASD (Ages 18-29) In Regards To College Persistence**

| Authors                                      | Study Description                                                                      | Proposed Solution                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Research Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Sample Participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Procedures                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Baczewski, Pizzano, Kasari, & Sturm, (2022). | Matched comparison of ASD, ADHD, and Neurotypical students using national survey data. | Colleges should promote awareness of services. Primary care of college-bound ASD students should include optimizing the physical and mental health of students and preparing them for transition to adulthood. Regular follow-up is essential. | 1. How do students with ASD differ from demographically matched NT and ADHD peers on college adjustment outcomes (i.e., social, personal/emotional, academic, and institutional adjustment)? 2. What factors are predictive of first-year adjustment outcomes for students with ASD? | They utilized national survey data to compare the first-year college adjustment experiences of 222 freshmen, comprising 74 self-identified students with ASD, 74 students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and 74 neurotypical (NT) students without diagnoses. To ensure comparability, students were matched on mental health and demographic characteristics. | To ensure comparability, students were matched on mental health and demographic characteristics. The study assessed various domains of adjustment—including academic, social, emotional, and institutional—at the end of the freshman year. Additionally, separate general linear models were employed to investigate predictors of positive self-reported first-year adjustment. | ASD students reported significantly lower levels of social self-confidence than their NT and ADHD peers at the end of freshman year. On all other adjustment domains, ASD students did not significantly differ. Social factors, including social self-confidence and ease of making friends, emerged as significant contributors to positive first-year adjustments. |

**Post-School Experiences Of Youth With ASD (Ages 18-29) In Regards To College Persistence**

| Authors                                                                  | Study Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Proposed Solution                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Research Questions                                                                                                                                                           | Sample Participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Procedures                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cox, Thompson, Anderson, Mintz, Locks, Morgan, Edelstein, & Wolz (2017). | Personal interviews with a diverse group of students with autism, this study (a) amplifies these students' voices, (b) describes tensions between their public and private identities, (c) outlines the academic, social, emotional, self-advocacy, and communication challenges they face in college, and (d) proposes both general principles and specific practices that could be leveraged to facilitate postsecondary success for students with autism. | Institutions hoping to facilitate a developmentally appropriate educational experience will thus be required to provide a variety of support services for students with autism. Students with ASD may need support services that cross over institutional divisions and units within those divisions (e.g., housing, transportation, registration, testing). | (a) How do students with autism make sense of their experiences with higher education? and (b) How do these students respond to potential barriers to postsecondary success? | Four categories of adults with ASD as they relate to postsecondary education: (a) nonstarters, participants who had not yet attempted college; (b) current students enrolled in college; (c) departers, participants who had attended a postsecondary institution but left before completing their degree; and (d) completers, participants who had completed college and earned a postsecondary credential. 9 students in study: Ages 18-50+ | Five-Part Semistructured Interview Protocol (Fetterman, 1998). Interviews were video recorded, except for one, which was audio recorded. Data analysis used a constant comparative approach. Data triangulation to minimize limitations. | For the students interviewed in this study, there existed a recognizable tension between their public efforts to pass themselves off as normal and their private efforts to embrace autism as part of their unique identities. These students' consideration of whether and when to "come out" involved consideration not only of who they were, but also how they would be perceived by the culture in which they were operating. |

**Post-School Experiences Of Youth With ASD (Ages 18-29) In Regards To College Persistence**

| Authors                                 | Study Description                                                                                                                   | Proposed Solution                                                                        | Research Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Sample Participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Procedures                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jackson, Hart, Brown, & Volkmar (2018). | An online survey of post-secondary students with ASD in the areas of self-reported academic, social, and mental health experiences. | Students with ASD would benefit from support in academic, social, and emotional domains. | Aim to acquire a broad understanding of the range of experiences of post-secondary students with ASD to gather details on where difficulties are arising from for these students, and to gain critical insight into how schools may better be able to support these students and address their unique challenges. | 56 adults aged 18-57 years old, 26 male and 26 female, are currently enrolled in a post-secondary academic institution. 40 undergrads at 4-yr universities, 49 studying in the US, age of diagnosis 3-38, 34 diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome | Survey covered four domains: demographics, academic experiences, social experiences, and mental well-being, utilizing Autism-Spectrum Quotient, UCLA Loneliness Scale, Suicide Behavior Questionnaire-Revised, 21-item Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale. Anonymous responses. All aspects of the study were reviewed and approved by the Yale School of Medicine Institutional Review Board. | Academic Domain: Many students felt that they were performing adequately in their coursework, with academic success generally rated as satisfactory. Social Domain: Despite their academic strengths, a notable number of students reported difficulties with social integration. Many experienced feelings of social isolation and challenges in establishing close, supportive relationships. Mental Health Domain: A considerable proportion of the respondents reported elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. |

## Appendix C: Literature Review Summary Addressing Topic 2

| <b>Positive And Negative Factors In High School Transition Planning And Programming</b> |                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                     |                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Authors                                                                                 | Study Description                                                                                                                                  | Proposed Solution                                                   | Research Questions                                                                       | Sample Participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Procedures                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Harn, Azios, Azios, & Smith (2020).                                                     | Phenomenological study of lived experiences of college students with ASD                                                                           | Promote self-determination and social navigation/skills in programs | To illustrate the essence of being a college student with ASD.                           | Convenience sample. Inclusionary criteria: part-time or full-time enrollment in or recent graduate from a 2-year or 4-year college and a self-disclosed ASD diagnosis. 6 males and 1 female, ages 19-24, 6 received support from regional vocational rehab services. | In-depth semistructured interviews lasting between 37 and 80 minutes. Audio recordings with verbatim transcription. Data analysis in a cyclical fashion. Epoche was employed, field notes and journals kept. | Three major themes emerged: shifting perspectives (discovering agency, handling new challenges, and empathic feelings); motivating factors (ASD as an advantage and paying their own way); and to socialize or not to socialize. |
| Hedges, Kirby, Sreckovic, Kucharczyk, Hume, & Pace (2014).                              | Qualitative study using focus groups to find out the experiences of high school students with ASD, their families, and professionals serving them. | Inform practices and improve processes.                             | What is challenging about high school for students with ASD and their service providers? | 41 participants across 7 focus groups; 3-9 participants per group;                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 7 focus groups across two communities in a southeastern US state that represented distinct populations.                                                                                                      | Challenges for students with ASD: inconsistencies, difficulties with interpersonal connections, and knowledge/process breakdowns.                                                                                                |

| Positive And Negative Factors In High School Transition Planning And Programming |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reis, Gelbar, & Madaus (2022).                                                   | Comparative case studies using semi-structured interviews of 40 twice exceptional students enrolled in or recently graduated from highly competitive colleges in the US were used to explore experiences that enabled success. | Informed practices improve outcomes. | 1. What are the demographics and related characteristics of academically talented students with ASD who were successful in high school and are attending or recently graduated from competitive colleges?<br>2. What are the academic, social, and extracurricular experiences of academically talented students with ASD who were academically successful in high school that facilitated their ability to attend competitive colleges? | Purposive sampling 40 students: 9 female, 27 male, 4 other; 9 freshmen, 5 sophomore, 8 junior, 6 senior, 8 difficult to categorize, 4 graduate student; HS GPA: 3.5-4.0 25, 3.0-3.4 8, Identified as gifted or talented 21; sports/clubs 36, advanced/accelerated courses 29, residential programs 20. | Questions written by researchers and field tests. Interviews were conducted and transcribed for analysis. Interviews lasted 1 hr and follow-up questionnaires for clarification, member checks. | Having academic talents, participated in challenging honors classes, enrichment opportunities, interest-based extra-curricular activities, residential summer programs, and pursued other advanced educational experiences. |

| Positive And Negative Factors In High School Transition Planning And Programming |                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nasamran, Witmer, & Los (2017).                                                  | Regression analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 examined the extent to which academic skills and social skills predicted postsecondary outcomes for youth with ASD. | Improve both academic and social skills during high school to support postsecondary education, employment, and independence. | 1. To what extent do academic achievement and social skills in high school predict postsecondary education enrollment and/or graduation? 2. To what extent do academic achievement and social skills predict postsecondary employment? 3. To what extent do academic achievement and social skills predict overall success? and 4. To what extent do academic achievement and social skills predict an individual's ability to live independently? | 170 higher-functioning students with ASD (national sample, NLTS2)                      | Analyzed NLTS2 data with logistic regression models; measured academics with WJ-III scores and social skills via parent ratings | Academic achievement is significantly related to postsecondary education and overall success; social skills are significantly predicted by all three postsecondary outcomes for students with ASD |
| Ressa, T. (2022).                                                                | Qualitative study exploring what enabled five college students with disabilities to transition successfully from high school to college.                                                | Promote self-determination, inclusive education, and early development of transition-related competencies.                   | What enablers support a successful transition from high school to college for students with disabilities?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 5 undergraduate students with physical and sensory disabilities at a public university | In-depth interviews, focus group, thematic analysis guided by Self-Determination Theory                                         | Self-determination and inclusion in general education enabled transition success despite barriers.                                                                                                |

### Appendix D: Literature Review Summary Addressing Topic 3

| <b>Emerging Trends And Effective Models For Transition Planning</b> |                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                  |                                                              |                                                                                                 |                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Authors                                                             | Study Description                                                                                                  | Proposed Solution                                                                                                  | Research Questions                                                                               | Sample Participants                                          | Procedures                                                                                      | Results                                                                                    |
| Dente & Coles (2012).                                               | Theoretical article advocating for ecological social work approaches in transition planning for students with ASD. | Involve social workers in transition planning using ecological theory to address person-in-environment challenges. | How can ecological systems theory guide social work intervention in college transition planning? | Not applicable (conceptual discussion)                       | Discussion of challenges, legal changes, and how social work can support students with ASD      | Argues that social workers are underutilized and highly suited for transition planning     |
| Kuhn, Ruble, McGrew, Adams, & Snell-Rood, C. (2022).                | Evaluated real-world implementation of Transitioning Together in high schools as part of the CSESA project.        | Implement a multi-family transition program in schools with staff training and fidelity monitoring.                | What supports or hinders program adoption in schools? Can it be implemented with fidelity?       | 30 public high schools; students with ASD and their families | Training staff, delivering 8-week group sessions, and collecting fidelity and satisfaction data | High fidelity in most schools; positive family feedback; lower adoption in low-SES schools |
| Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, Adams, Snell-Rood, C., & Jung (2019).     | Adapted COMPASS for high school students with ASD to support transition outcomes using implementation science.     | Use ecological and implementation science frameworks to guide adaptation of an existing consultation model.        | How can COMPASS be adapted for transition-age youth with ASD, and is it feasible and acceptable? | Educators, parents, and students in the pilot                | Focus groups to inform changes; surveys to assess implementation experience                     | High satisfaction reported; feasible with minor adaptations                                |

| Emerging Trends And Effective Models For Transition Planning            |                                                                                                             |                                                                                                              |                                                                                                         |                                                          |                                                                                   |                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Authors                                                                 | Study Description                                                                                           | Proposed Solution                                                                                            | Research Questions                                                                                      | Sample Participants                                      | Procedures                                                                        | Results                                                                       |
| Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu, & Shattuck (2015)                              | Examines how transition planning and goal-setting affect college enrollment for youth with ASD.             | Encourage meaningful student participation and explicit college goals in transition planning.                | Do transition planning and college goal-setting increase college enrollment rates among youth with ASD? | Youth with ASD from the NLTS2 dataset (national sample)  | Analysis of NLTS2 data; propensity score weighting                                | Both variables significantly increased the odds of college enrollment         |
| White, Elias, Capriola-Hall, Smith, Conner, Asselin, & Mazefsky (2021). | RCT evaluating the STEPS program to improve transition readiness and college adjustment for youth with ASD. | Implement a two-track intervention (STEPS) focusing on self-determination, emotion regulation, and advocacy. | Does STEPS improve transition readiness and college adaptation for youth with ASD?                      | 59 high school and college students with ASD, ages 16–25 | Pre-, post-, and follow-up assessments; tracked progress during and after program | Significant improvements in both readiness and adaptation; large effect sizes |

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