

From Pilot to Blueprint: *A Model Built for Reporting and Scale*

THE CHALLENGE

The move from middle school to high school is a big shift for any student. There's a new building, new teachers, and new expectations to figure out. For students with disabilities, that shift is often harder due to inconsistency around support and access to resources. Without a clear process to guide the transition, many of these students start high school already behind their non-disabled peers.

Recently, we partnered with a state agency focused on increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the transition between middle and high school, so students with disabilities are set up for success from day one. A key part of the challenge they are addressing is that there is no corresponding built-in data or accountability structure. While IDEA requires states to track the transition into preschool and the transition out of high school, there is no similar measure in between. Without a requirement, most schools don't collect or review data on how students ages 10 to 13 are experiencing the transition from middle to high school. Our partners wanted to change this through a statewide approach to middle to high school transition planning.

OUR APPROACH

We collaborated with the state to design and pilot a Transition Toolkit built specifically for the middle-to-high-school handoff. The Toolkit gives schools, families, and students practical tools to structure transition meetings, build student self-advocacy skills, strengthen student readiness, and foster collaboration between middle and high school teams. It is organized so educators and families can either pick the tools that fit their students' needs or follow the full sequence to build a coordinated, yearlong transition plan. At its core, the Toolkit is built to keep students active participants in their own transition, families informed, and staff across schools working from the same information.

“We wanted this project to change how districts work together in service of middle school students. **This pilot showed that when leaders, staff, and families work from the same information, students are the ones who benefit.**”

-Lauren LeBental
SPED Strategies Vice President



Five districts were selected to take part in the pilot during the 2025–26 school year, which was structured around a set of connected technical assistance activities:

Community of Practice

Monthly virtual sessions where district leaders helped co-construct the Toolkit and troubleshoot implementation together.

Convenings

In-person trainings held in the fall and spring for educators and district leaders to dig into the Toolkit and build local implementation plans.

Focus Groups

A dedicated space where educators shared what was and wasn't working.

Data-Driven Decision Making

An ongoing digital dashboard that gave district leaders real-time visibility into student readiness and toolkit usage.

Consult Calls

One-on-one check-ins between district teams and expert coaches to review the established implementation plans and what comes next.

The feedback loop running underneath all of it is not only what made this approach work, but was also highly effective. Every activity fed data back into the Toolkit itself, and that data drove real changes to the tools throughout the year. When educator teams found that students didn't understand how an IEP could support them, the team built a dedicated student-facing guide on how to use the IEP as a tool for self-advocacy. When families said they needed more guidance on what high school would actually look like, the team built family-facing guides organized around the questions families ask most, paired with resources that help them understand what to expect and how to support their child through the Middle to High School transition. When districts struggled to figure out when to use which tool first, the team added a Quick Start guide that helped them select the right tool at the right time.

The Outcome

By June 2026, the pilot had produced a finished Transition Toolkit and a companion asynchronous learning course, ready for districts to adopt statewide starting in fall 2026. But the more important outcome was the visibility behind it. **For the first time, our partners had a live view of how students ages 10 to 13 were experiencing the Middle to High School transition. In one snapshot, 1,500 students had completed the High School Readiness Self-Assessment, with results broken out by readiness level.** That kind of visibility, at the student level and aggregated for state and district leaders, is exactly what had been missing.



The pilot also solved a coordination problem that shows up in almost any program with different roles at different levels, across various organizations. District leaders weren't always connected to the people doing the implementation work on the ground, which led to inconsistent results across pilot districts. Through a shared digital dashboard, district leaders, implementation teams, and support staff had access to the same data, giving everyone a direct line to student readiness and Toolkit usage instead of information being passed down. The pilot proved the model can work. It gave our partners a clear, ongoing picture of how students in this age range were doing, and it gave districts a repeatable coordination structure they could carry forward.

What This Means for Other States

Many states are working to better understand what students are experiencing during the Middle to High School transition, and how to keep all stakeholders across different levels of a program connected to each other along the way. The model used in this pilot is a repeatable structure that other states can adapt to their own program needs. Start with a small group of sites, build a coordination process that keeps leadership, implementation teams, and support staff talking directly instead of relying on information passed down the chain. Pair it with a data dashboard that turns student experience into something state and district leaders can see and act on; and use the first year to decide what needs to change before scaling statewide. States working toward a clearer picture of these students don't have to figure this out from scratch. We have the blueprint, and we are ready to help you adapt it to your community's needs.

Let's Talk

If your state is facing a similar gap, we'd like to hear more about what some of your challenges may be. Schedule a call with our team by scanning the QR code below. Together, we will discuss what a pilot could look like for your school districts, how to structure a coordination process across your program's partners, what kind of data dashboard would be useful for your reporting, and where your state already has infrastructure to build on.



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