Introduction

Building the Bridge Before Tomorrow Arrives

Every student, special or otherwise, eventually reaches the final day of school. The classrooms, teachers, schedules, and services that shaped daily life come to an end. The school bus stops arriving. The IEP team no longer meets.

Then comes the first Monday after graduation, when the student is expected to step into adult life.

This book follows Evan and Noah, two young men with severe attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia. Both needed intensive reading instruction, appropriate services, career preparation, and adults who understood their disabilities. Yet they left high school prepared for very different lives.

Their stories run throughout this book because they show what transition planning looks like when it works, and what happens when it does not. The decisions made during Individualized Education Program/Individualized Transition Plan (IEP/ITP) meetings do not remain inside the conference room or disappear into a school file. They follow the student into employment, relationships, independence, and adult life.

Graduation ends school. Commencement begins what comes next. A diploma proves that a student completed high school. It does not prove that the student was prepared for life after high school.

Evan received the help he needed. His abilities and interests were taken seriously. He received appropriate reading instruction, explored possible careers, practiced workplace skills, and learned how to speak for himself. His ITP was not simply completed, filed away, and forgotten. It was put into action and revised as his needs and goals changed. In the years that followed, Evan went to college, earned an associate degree in veterinary technology, found a job, and began building an independent life.

Noah's experience was painfully different.

His transition documents contained many of the right words, but those words rarely led to action. His goals were vague. Services were promised but not consistently provided. No one took

responsibility for determining whether his plan was actually working. As a result, he lost valuable opportunities to gain work experience, develop independent-living skills, and prepare for adulthood.

For the most part, Noah had what I call a Zombie ITP, a document that appeared alive on paper but accomplished nothing. In other words, it said nothing, so it did nothing.

Noah did not lack intelligence or potential. He lacked the preparation and support he should have received while he was still in school. After graduation, he struggled to keep a job, became increasingly isolated, depended heavily on his parents, used drugs, and eventually came into contact with the criminal justice system.

His parents attempted to rescue him again and again. But parents cannot spend the rest of their lives replacing the skills, confidence, experience, and support that should have been developed before their child left school.

An ITP is more than another standardized form or box to check. It should identify where the student wants to go, what the student must learn before leaving school, which services and experiences are needed, who will provide them, and when they will be provided.

The central question of this book is simple:

What must we do before graduation to ensure that the student enters adult life with a destination in mind and a bridge strong enough to reach it? This book is the answer to that question!

By the end of this book, you will understand what a strong transition plan should contain, what questions must be asked, which services and agencies may be needed, and how to recognize empty promises and Zombie ITPs.