Directing the Table: Empowering Parents for Stronger Transition Outcomes

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Students with special learning needs (SSLN) have many issues when attempting to access quality education that would prepare them for post-secondary pursuits. Upon investigation, two themes stand out 1.) persistent devaluing of the potential of the SSLN, and 2.) the absence of the caregiver's voice in their son or daughter's educational plan.

To address the lack of parental advocacy and voice in the decisions of their child's education plan, a Parent Empowerment Group was developed at the Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living. The group was introduced to local, state and federal agencies who offer services to enhance transition skills of the SSLN. The goal was to increase the voice of the caregiver so the interests of the child would become the center of their transition plan. Participants were pulled from the local school systems in the Lehigh Valley area and bi-monthly meetings were organized through Zoom. The participants were provided pre- and post- surveys and some individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted to measure the growth of caregivers' knowledge of services offered by outside agencies.

Once parents were able to connect to the various agencies, they advocated for their child's transition plan to increase outside agency services to enhance their child's training. However, many of the caregivers who come from a culturally and linguistically diverse community were not able to engage with this program. It is important to dismantle these barriers so all of the children with developmental disabilities are able to access a free and appropriate education.

Key Terms

Transition Services, Transition Plan, Center for Independent Living, Caregiver, Interagency Collaboration, Partnership, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) families, parent empowerment, outside agency, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation School, Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1.0 Introduction: Naming & Framing the Problem of Practice (PoP)

1.1 Broader Problem Area

In 1961, John F Kennedy summarized his belief of education in his famous quote: "Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and for our nation." The belief that all people have an inherent right to a quality education has been a point of contention for our republic since its conception. Continuous, hard-fought battles for equality and equity are common for many sectors of our population, but individuals with special needs fare worse than most. Despite many attempts to reform the educational system, there remain tremendous barriers blocking meaningful reform, such as performative measures and inadequate effort by those in control to include key stakeholders in decision making required to ensure equitable distribution of resources and direct access to programs.

1.1.1 Legislative Polices

In 2014, the employment rate of adults with disabilities was a dismal 34.6% (*The Cornell University Disability Status Reports,* 2014). Additionally, there were 453,754 Individualized Plans for Employment for people with disabilities created through the office of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). Only 97,305 of those plans ended with achieving employment, producing a 21.4% success rate (US Department of Education, 2018). These numbers are showing a slight increase but are still alarming. In 2019, the overall employment rate in the United States for individuals with a disability was 39.2% and 38.9 % in Pennsylvania (Yang & Tan, 2022). Due to these dismal findings, the federal and state governments developed policies to improve employability skills of people with disabilities. One example is the Workforce Innovation and

Opportunity Act (WIOA), which was enacted in 2016. It was a bi-partisan effort to help job seekers on varying levels gain access to employment, education, training, and support services needed to succeed in the labor market. WIOA, a federally funded mandate, was designed to fuse inter-agency services hoping to increase employment for the overall population. By focusing specifically on issues surrounding unemployment for people with disabilities, WIOA legislation has a monetary inducement of 15% of federal monies earmarked for local VR offices to increase pre-employment skills for students with disabilities. To reinforce these federal efforts two years later the General Assembly of Pennsylvania enacted the Work Experience for High School Students with Disabilities Act, (Act 26). Act 26 mandated that local education and public agencies collaborate to ensure the employment readiness of students with disabilities graduating from high schools (Work Experience for High School Students with Disabilities Act, 2022). However, these policies continue to fall short.

Little has been achieved in increasing collaborative efforts to reach larger populations of students with disabilities. For instance, in the 2021-2022 school year, there were 151,000 students with disabilities in the age range of 14 -21 years old throughout the Pennsylvania school system. However, VR representatives across the state attended only 1,206 IEP meetings or .07% of meetings for these students, who had an active transitional plan (Employment First Data Dashboard, 2022). Without the input of outside agencies, most families are underinformed about potential programs that would benefit their son or daughter.

Students with special learning needs (SSLN) have many issues when attempting to access quality education, especially needed resources from outside agencies such as those offered by the office of VR. The inability to access outside agency support has a lasting effect on the overall quality of life for this population, particularly, in gaining meaningful employment. In Pennsylvania, approximately 14% of the population is a person with a disability (Brucker et al.,

2020). Based on the Open Data website of Governor Wolf, only 21.4% of people identified with a disability are actively and competitively engaged in the PA workforce (Employment First Data Dashboard, 2022). On a local level, in 2020, the Lehigh County Office of Intellectual Disabilities captured employment data showing only one third of the intellectual disabled population residing in Lehigh County. Of those clients, a small portion received services or had active employment on any level. Most clients did not have any employment or volunteering experience (Lehigh County Office of Intellectual Disabilities, 2020). When considering the low employment rate of people with a disability, it is alarming that programs offered by local agencies tend to be accessed by a small scale of individuals who already have connections to services and funding opportunities. Therefore, these attempted reforms do not produce a large enough change to stabilize the inequitable employment issues for people with disabilities.

With the length of time for instruction, access to the community for training, and the amount of government money provided for these programs, the poor results of post-secondary employment are quite disturbing. Upon investigation into the many issues causing these bleak outcomes, a theme emerged reflecting a persistent devaluing of the potential in the students with a disability, as well as the absence of the caregiver's voice in their son or daughter's educational plan.

1.1.2 Parental Involvement

Prior to discussing parental involvement, I would like to define the term caregiver. According to Merriam-Webster (2023) a caregiver is a person who provides direct care (as for children, elderly people, or the chronically ill). This term is being used to provide an inclusive understanding to the varied dynamics within the home life of individuals with disabilities.

Research has consistently indicated that effective transition planning for SSLN is directly correlated to positive post-secondary outcomes in postsecondary education/training, employment, and independent living (Test et al., 2009). Simultaneously, research has shown that SSLN continues to lag over peers in these areas, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds (Gothberg et al., 2018). As discussed by Wilt & Morningstar (2018), transition planning, which takes place in a formalized manner, tends to reflect the dominant cultural lens within schools and public agency systems. The lack of culturally relevant transition services insufficiently meets the needs of all young adults, exasperating the equity issues found within the overall educational system (Wilt & Morningstar, 2018).

One barrier in achieving culturally relevant transition services is the disenfranchisement of caregivers who care for students from marginalized backgrounds. Many of these caregivers lack understanding of and access to needed services within an elaborate system (Wilt & Morningstar, 2018). Caregivers struggle to understand how to navigate the special education system and become reliant on uninformed or under informed school systems or social work agencies. This is exacerbated among culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families. Many never gain access to federal and state mandated services, which affects the quality of life of SSLN (Wilt & Morningstar, 2018). One factor within this struggle is that the school systems have contracted with agency programs that have predetermined training options with little desire in providing individualized programs for students. This curtails the ability of caregivers to advocate for services that would address individualized strengths of their child forcing them to navigate and accept a highly formalized education program (Wilt & Morningstar, 2018). Overall, caregivers especially those from CLD backgrounds are excluded from equitable educational programs due to barriers in access caused by financial restraints, unaware of its existence, or competitive placements that restrict participants (Wilt & Morningstar, 2018).

SSLN tend to be marginalized from the public when attempting to gain access to quality and equitable education and employment training. One of the greatest hurdles for caregivers is not having access to information about programs with shared norms and values within the system that was designed to provide these very educational services (Wilt & Morningstar, 2018). According to Grigal et al., (2011), 73% of parent respondents felt that one of the greatest barriers for their SSLN was the lack of general knowledge or guidance from their school when it came to post-secondary education. Within the special education population, the CLD communities tend to be a part of a subsections that is further marginalized when compared to the overall special education population (Barrera and Corso, 2012). As defined by Barrera and Corso (2012), CLD communities are not based solely on the ethnicity of an individual, but rather the interactions and comparison between people within a shared environment. The difficulty arises in the school system when people have diverse cultural beliefs and/or speak a different language. Communication can create stressful or uncomfortable environments which in return creates communication gaps or a complete lack of communication (Barrera et al., 2012).

One example is the inequitable knowledge of and the access to post-secondary education (PSE) options within the transition plan for SSLN, especially students with intellectual disabilities. PSE has been identified as a leading factor for higher paying employment as well as retention in the workforce (Grigal et al., 2011). At the federal level, PSE transition options are rising. However, many secondary public school systems lack knowledge of these programs to adequately advise SSLN when developing their transition plan, especially when VR services are not provided to the SSLN (Grigal et al., 2014). Grigal et al., (2011) cite a recent national survey of 149 existing PSE program respondents, which served students with ID in 37 states. The survey found that 65% of the respondents served dually enrolled students with ID between the ages of 18 and 21 and still receive transition services through IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). These

programs varied from the level of integration, access to standard college courses, access to paid employment, and use of other disability services (Grigal et al., 2011). The study also found that SSLD with intellectual disabilities were prone to have sheltered work experiences goals and seldom provide the opportunity to work toward a PSE or competitive employment goal than any other disability (Grigal et al., 2011).

Therefore, it is necessary and a moral duty for school systems and its educators to address justice issues through programs and policies to create equitable systems for all including our CLD populations. By doing this, the programs designed will help all people experience a system that treats each person with respect and celebrates the gifts of their humanity. To achieve this level of reform, school and community systems must empower caregivers of SSLN on how to advocate for and then obtain the services and programs promised through federal and state policies. These are the stakeholders who will not waiver in their pursuit of equitable programing. To create this type of mindset educators must see the system in its entirety as well as compare the surrounding educational systems and call out the inequitable policies and/or lack of access to resources needed for special education programs.

1.2 Organizational System

1.2.1 County

This study will pull its participants from the school districts in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania. This area of Pennsylvania has a wide demographic range with a growing population. In 2020, Lehigh Valley had a population of 367k people with a median age of 39 and a median household income of $66,214. From 2019 to 2020, the population grew .676% and median income grew 3.67% from 2019 to 2020. The five largest ethnic groups in Lehigh County, PA are White

(Non-Hispanic) (63.2%), White (Hispanic) (13%), Other (Hispanic) (5.76%), Black or African American (Non-Hispanic) (5.65%), and two+ (Hispanic) (4.76%) (*Lehigh County, PA* 2020). In *Table 1*, the racial breakdown of four local schools is compared and represents cross sections of the overall make-up of schools in the Lehigh Valley.

Table 1 Racial Breakdown of Local School District
(American Community Survey, 2021)

School District	Percent of African Americans	Percent of Asian Americans	Percent of Latino/a	Percent of White	Multi-racial	American Indian	Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian
Allentown SD	11	1	58	28	2	0	0
Bethlehem SD	7	3	25	61	3	0	0
Northampton SD	2	1	6	89	2	0	0
Parkland SD	4	9	10	74	3	0	0

1.2.2 School Systems

In Table 2 and in the subsequent paragraphs are basic descriptions of four school districts within the Lehigh Valley, which this study has selected as its sample. Overall, the Lehigh Valley is made up of 17 school districts, and these four districts represent the overall collective demographic area. However, some respondents may fall within one of the other school districts, but their demographic will be like the descriptions provided below. These descriptions are based on the information found on the Niche website, as well as information from the American Community Survey.

Table 2 Basic Description of School Districts
(American Community Survey, 2021)

School District	Size of the district in sq. miles	Population	Percent of Persons below poverty line	Median Income	Niche (5 Star) Rating
Allentown SD Class A	16.6	121765	17.8	45,155	3.4
Bethlehem SD Class B	41.5	119,445	14	68,533	4.1
Northampton SD Class C	95.6	43,715	8	76180	3.9
Parkland SD Class D	72.2	69,155	5	105,372	4

1.2.3 Parkland School District

Parkland School district is 72.2 square miles and encompasses three townships with a population of about 69,000. The district's wide socio-economic range results from it bordering the city of Allentown on the southeast and extending to farmland at the western and northern perimeters. Disaggregation of socioeconomic data reveals that the district is populated by a largely middle class to upper middle-class households. There are over 38 native languages spoken within homes residing in the district. The high school curriculum offers classes in six foreign languages (Parent et al., 2022).

As shown in Table 1, the district has a varied racial demographic; the current breakdown is as follows:

- 74 % White

- 4% African American

- 6% Latinx

- 9% Asian American

- 3% multi-racial

- 0% American Indian

- 0% Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian

According to Niche, Parkland High School (PHS) is a highly rated public school in Allentown, PA. It has 3,199 students in grades 9-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 16 to 1. According to state test scores, 82% of students are at least proficient in math and 70% in reading. PHS is ranked #23 out of 495 as an overall best public school in PA. For athletics it is ranked #3 out of 495 high schools within PA. The district has a 95% graduation rate and has an average SAT score of 1240 and an ACT test of 29 (Parent et al., 2022; American Community Survey, 2021).

1.2.4 Northampton School District

Northampton School District is 95.6 square miles and encompasses one township with a population of about 43,715 people. The median household income for Northampton families is $76,180 a year. The median rent is $1,029 and the median home value is $167,400 (Alum & Senior, 2022; American Community Survey, 2021. The student body at the schools served by Northampton Area School District is broken down in the following demographics

- 89% White

- 2% African American

- 6% Latinx

- 1% Asian American

- 2% multi-racial

- 0% American Indian

- 0% Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian

Also, 48% of students are female, and 52% of students are male. At schools in Northampton Area School District, 24.0% of students are eligible to participate in the federal free and reduced-price meal program and 0.6% of students are English language learners (Alum & Senior, 2022).

According to Niche, Northampton Area School District is an above-average public school district in Northampton, PA. It has 5,312 students in grades PK, K-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 14 to 1. According to state test scores, 48% of students are at least proficient in math and 67% in reading. For athletics it is ranked #209 out of 495 high schools within PA. Northampton High School has an 89% graduation rate, and the average SAT score is 1160 and a 25 for ACT (Alum & Senior, 2022).

1.2.5 Allentown School District

The Allentown School District is a large, urban public school district in Allentown, Pennsylvania in the Lehigh Valley region of eastern Pennsylvania. It encompasses 16.6 square miles (American Community Survey, 2021) making it the fourth largest school district in Pennsylvania as of the 2016-17 academic year. The school district includes two large urban public high schools, Allen High School, and Dieruff High School, each based in Allentown, for grades nine through 12 (Senior & Alum, 2020). As of the 2020-21 school year, 121,765 students attend its 21 schools, according to data released by the American Community Survey.

According to the 2020 census, the Allentown School District serves a resident population of 125,845. In 2009, the per capita income was $16,282 and median family income was $37,356 compared to a Pennsylvania median family income of $49,501 and overall U.S. median family income of $49,445 as of the 2010 census (Senior & Alum, 2020). Median family income did see

a slight raise in 2021 to $45,155 according to the American Community Survey. The diverse student body within the schools served by Allentown City School District are as follows:

- 28% White
- 7% African American
- 58% Latinx
- 3% Asian American
- 2% multi-racial
- 0% American Indian
- 0% Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian

In addition, 2% of students are of two or more races. Also, 47% of students are female, and 53% of students are male (Senior & Alum, 2020).

Within the Allentown City School District, 67.1% of students are eligible to participate in the federal free and meal program and 13.6% of students are English language learners. Allentown City School District has a student-teacher ratio of 17 to 1. According to state test scores, 20% of students are at least proficient in math and 35% in reading. Allentown is 85 out of 495 schools with the most diverse student population (Senior & Alum, 2020).

1.2.6 Bethlehem School District

According to Niche, Bethlehem Area School District is an above average, public school district located in Bethlehem, PA. The district spans approximately 41.5 square miles with approximately 119,445 residents (American Community Survey, 2021). Currently, Bethlehem Area School District has a student-teacher ratio of 16 to 1. According to state test scores, 33% of students are at least proficient in math and 55% in reading. The district has an 83% graduation rate with many students attending post-secondary schooling. The average SAT score is 1150 and

ACT is 27. School District ranks 182 out of 495 for best school district. In athletics, it is ranked 74th out of 495 and the 7th most diverse school district out of the 495 school districts in Pennsylvania (Explore Bethlehem Area School District 2021).

The diverse student body at the schools served by Bethlehem Area School District are as follows:

- 61% White
- 11% African American
- 25% Latinx
- 1% Asian American
- 3% multi-racial
- 0% American Indian
- 0% Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian

The educational attainment levels of 25 years old or over within the Bethlehem Area School District population were 87.9% high school graduates and 30.5% college graduates. However, the district also struggles with poverty and equity issues. Based on eligibility to qualify for the federal free or reduced-price school meal program in 2012, 49.9% of the district's pupils lived at 185% or below the federal poverty level. In 2013, the Pennsylvania Department of Education reported that 285 students in the Bethlehem Area School District were homeless (Senior, 2021; *Explore Bethlehem Area School District,* 2021).

1.3 Community Agency: Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living (LVCIL)

LVCIL is a non-profit national organization with a base in Allentown, PA. LVCIL provides services and support to people with all types of disabilities. LVCIL believes that every individual has the right to live a healthy, happy, and productive life in a community that is free from all

barriers. They are dedicated to helping consumers achieve or maintain independence through many of their supportive services and programs (*Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living* 2022). LVCIL is an important part of the system for youth with disabilities. This organization is charged with addressing pre-employment skills and transition skills for youth as they graduate from the public school system. With the passing of WIOA and its influence on the Rehabilitation Act, Center for Independent Living (CIL) agencies have been a major influence in how SSLN succeed as they age out of the public school system. The latest research findings, actions and advocacy work have called for stronger and more effective inter-agency collaboration to produce successful post-secondary outcomes. Though VR agencies tend to be the leading actor in this field, the CIL agencies are displaying enormous potential as an avenue to help caregivers and SSLN achieve maximum potential (Plotner & Walters, 2022).

1.4 Stakeholders

The stakeholders involved with developing quality transition outcomes for SSLN are the caregivers and young adults in the school system which consists of teachers, general education administrators and special education administrators. Lastly, community agencies with access to federal and state funds and understanding these legislative mandates such as IDEA and other policies can help develop positive post-secondary outcomes for the SSLN population.

Most of the stakeholders pertaining to my Dissertation in Practice (DiP) are found within the school system. Second to the students, caregivers are at the center of my DiP. The caregivers have a great deal of stress and worry when compared to a nondisabled family member. According to Indriasari (2022), mothers who have children with disabilities have higher levels of anxiety and anxiety about chronic disease when compared to mothers whose children do not have a disability.

One of the largest worries for caregivers is the well-being of their SSLN if something should happen to them. Who will take care of them? Will they be well looked after?

The reality for caregivers with children who have intellectual disabilities can seem stark, causing a great deal of stress. It is important for those who provide services to maintain a keen awareness of these factors. In 2020, 17.9% of adults with an intellectual impairment were employed. In 2017, adults with a cognitive impairment and worked full time had a median annual salary of $37,500. The median was based on a sample size of 568 adults. Overall, 34.9% of adults (21-67 years of age) with cognitive impairment live in poverty (*National Snapshot of adults with intellectual disabilities in the Labor Force* 2018).

Parents tend to rely on educators who can help guide them and their child through the system as he/she gains important academic skills. The teaching professionals will span from the general education classroom to the Intermediate Unit provider, which are public entities that serve a large geographic area within several school districts. They provided specialized services beyond the public-school domain (Intermediate units in Pennsylvania, 2023). Traditionally, a special education teacher is assigned to a student each year to help guide them through available services. Many times, students that might have more needs or are more difficult to place in the general education environment may have a small team of teachers that span the student's public education career.

Ideally, all the employees within the school systems should work collectively for the betterment of the students and the family. Many times, communication can be strained or difficult, which affects access to services that might benefit the student. This occurs a great deal when the services are provided in a different setting than the home school. Often, the special education teacher or guidance counselor may not know that programs exist beyond those offered within their

school building. However, when the IEP team is functioning well it is quite beneficial and well-informed resulting in empowering the families and SSLD. This has been noted in a study completed by Erickson et al., (2013), where he found that outcomes for SSLN improve when the LEA has a high Indicator 13 compliance rating.

The community placement agencies are the final stakeholders in direct relationship to my DiP. Within the special education school system, SSLN can be enrolled within the public school system up until and including the age of 21 years. These additional years are designed to increase the students' access to pre-employment training and other transition services. The community becomes an integral aspect of the student's program. In addition to providing SSLN exposure to the community, they also provide SSLN with the ability to enroll in additional federal and/or state funded programs.

One example is LVCIL. This organization runs many programs designed to increase independent skills and self-advocacy skills for SSLN. They work with a local business, such as Dorney Park, to provide pre-employment skills and potential future employment for some youths with disabilities. Many of their programs are funded through federal laws aimed at addressing the low unemployment rate. The federal policy earmarked a portion of the money to be funneled to VR so their services could develop a program described above (Johnson, 2018).

Local agencies provide an additional layer of support to SSLN and their caregivers. Their services are aimed at transitional skills that should begin during high school and remain accessible as the SSLN age out of the school system. Special education teachers must provide knowledge of how to access these services for the students and their families. However, most special education teachers are not well informed of these services so many times these resources

do not able to reach their intended recipients due to a lack of collaboration between the school system and outside agencies (Plotner et al., 2020).

1.5 Statement of the Problem of Practice

Researchers have continually connected effective transition planning with positive post-secondary transition outcomes (Test et al., 2009). Despite these peer-accepted findings, the National Longitudinal Transition Study-1 (NLTS-1) and National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) have found that the SSLN population continue to lag behind their peers in relation to post-school outcomes in the areas of postsecondary education /training, employment, and independent living. These lags are even more profound for the subpopulation within the special education community, especially those from the CLD background (Gothberg et al., 2018).

Gothberg et al., (2018) further elaborate on NLTS-1 and NLTS-2 findings by stating CLD youth had poorer post-secondary outcomes when compared to their White peers with disabilities. Traditional special education programs/curriculums exacerbate these outcomes by being centered through the dominant cultural lens and implemented by professionals from the White population. The professional communication style tends to vary a great deal from that of the caregivers, which may result in the silencing of the CLD caregiver's voice. Another barrier created from this dynamic is entwined with the right of caregivers, especially CLD caregivers, to be the leading authority for their SSLN. Through the authorization of IDEA, the federal mandate is designed to provide an avenue for the caregivers and SSLN to have access to appropriate educational services and resources. However, if the caregivers are not armed with adequate information and are not within an equitable school system, they face the daunting task of navigating a complicated system with little guidance. Implemented on a local level, IDEA calls upon the caregivers to be advocates for their children arguing that caregivers are the ultimate authority on the strengths and needs of their

SSLN (Gothberg et al., 2018). This institutionalized the belief that caregivers are the best suited advocate for their child during important processes such as developing the SSLN's IEP. Therefore, school systems are held to a perfunctory level of compliance by the State when it comes providing access to resources needed to develop the transition plan.

The special education process is designed to be highly formalized and professional as seen in the level of the required paperwork. Basing the quality of the transition program on the advocacy of the caregiver oversimplifies an overly complex process especially when caregivers have minimum understanding of their rights and the potential programs available for their child (Levkoe et al., 2014). In a study conducted by Fitzgerald & Watkins (2006), results indicated that the readability of Parents' Rights documents were written at a college reading level or higher. Alarmingly, only 4% to 8% of these documents are written at the recommended reading level of eighth to ninth grade (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006). Another example is the reading level of the Pennsylvania Client Assistant Program (CAP) website. CAP is a state-run advocacy program mandated through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. According to the Act, each state is required to have an active CAP presence within the VR system. CAP should have influence in determining policy and reforms as well as the ability to assist individuals who are seeking or already have VR services but have concerns involving a program, project or facility providing rehabilitation services to them under the Act (*The Pennsylvania Client Assistance Program,* 2022).

When viewing the CAP Advocacy tab on its website, the section is dedicated to explaining the purpose of the program and how it is designed to be a safeguard for caregivers who receive or should receive rehabilitation services from VR or CIL agencies (The Pennsylvania Client Assistance Program, 2022). However, this important passage is unreadable to most of the population due to its readability scores on a collegiate level *(See Appendix 17.1-17.3).* The

verbiage of the passage is marked as having slightly over 28% difficult wordage as well as its overall readability scores land in the highest range on all the subtests (Datayze, n.d.). CAP is an important service to help protect SSLN by arming caregivers with an avenue to question practices or procedures of VR and/or CIL services. But this service becomes performative at best if the website is not accessible to caregivers who are unable to comprehend the service. This will be further reviewed later in the paper within Section 4: Learning and Actions.

Educators need to provide a space and a framework to help empower and guide the voice of parents so they can gain access to needed services. In doing this, they help other caregivers to gain similar access by sharing their experiences. This bolsters the policies and research on the necessity of parent advocacy skills. By utilizing a service-learning teaching framework when working with a parent group, it will help to transform how the caregivers perceive themselves and their role in their child's education. Service-learning is a teaching and learning framework which combines civic responsibility and learning through meaningful service to the community (Rydberg-Nania, 2020). Through this framework, caregivers will transform their knowledge about the complex special education system to actionable ideas on how programs should be implemented (Levkoe et al., 2014). The goal would be for caregivers to collectively focus on improving their community through their shared beliefs and values to drive the needed reforms. As caregivers, specifically CLD caregivers, shift from a passive participant to an active one, their sense of empowerment will ensure that their collective parental voice will center learning and other issues that need to be addressed within their cultural lens, rather than one that represents a White culture.

1.6 Review of Supporting Knowledge

It has been well documented that parental involvement in transition services for students with ID results in greater satisfaction and better outcomes (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Overall, best

practice in transition services includes a collaborative effort from the school, student/family, and community agencies where they can center the student's transition plan on his/her strengths and desired goals. Unfortunately, federally mandated compliance in transition planning has been noted to be woefully inadequate for students with ID (Shogren & Plotner, 2012).   A study conducted by Plotner et al., (2020) further backs earlier findings to support the research that interagency collaboration, in that frequent communication among transition personnel regarding transition activities and tasks, are necessary to effectively work with students and families when building transition plans. Frequently, special education teachers become the lead in the transition section of IEP development despite not being trained in transition programs or in communication with outside agencies (Plotner, et al., 2020). In short, the lack of collaboration between the schools and outside agencies tends to create inadequate transition plans for many SSLN.

As a result of inconsistent participation from families and/or SSLN in their transition planning, many students do not receive services offered by their state's VR agencies. In a study completed by Grigal et al (2014), post-secondary participation of youth with ID remains static at a national level and remains mixed with only showing half of the state VR programs reporting an increase of youths, who participate in developing their transition plan. In fact, one of the most reported barriers to effective transition was that local school districts did not engage VR agencies effectively (Grigal et al., 2014).

2.0 Theory of Improvement & Implementation Plan

2.1 Inquiry Questions

● Did the curriculum and events designed through the Parent Empowerment Group (PEG) program increase caregivers' knowledge and advocacy skills to improve their SSLN's transition plan

● What are the leading causes that prevent access to basic services?

2.2 Theory of Improvement

2.2.1 Change Idea

My change idea is centered on a three-prong parent empowerment program based at a community agency, Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living. By utilizing a service-learning teaching framework, caregivers will receive advocacy training through a curriculum generated by various agency resources such as, Partners in Policymaking, Parent Education & Advocacy Leadership (PEAL), and Transition Discoveries. Through the presentations, caregivers will learn about and develop strategies to enhance transition services for SSLN within the age range of 14-21 years of age in their local school systems. Caregivers will seek to enhance their SSLN's transition planning by advocating for interagency collaboration during IEP meetings. Lastly, caregivers will share valuable information learned as well as successful avenues used by other families with SSLN.

2.2.2 Driver Diagram
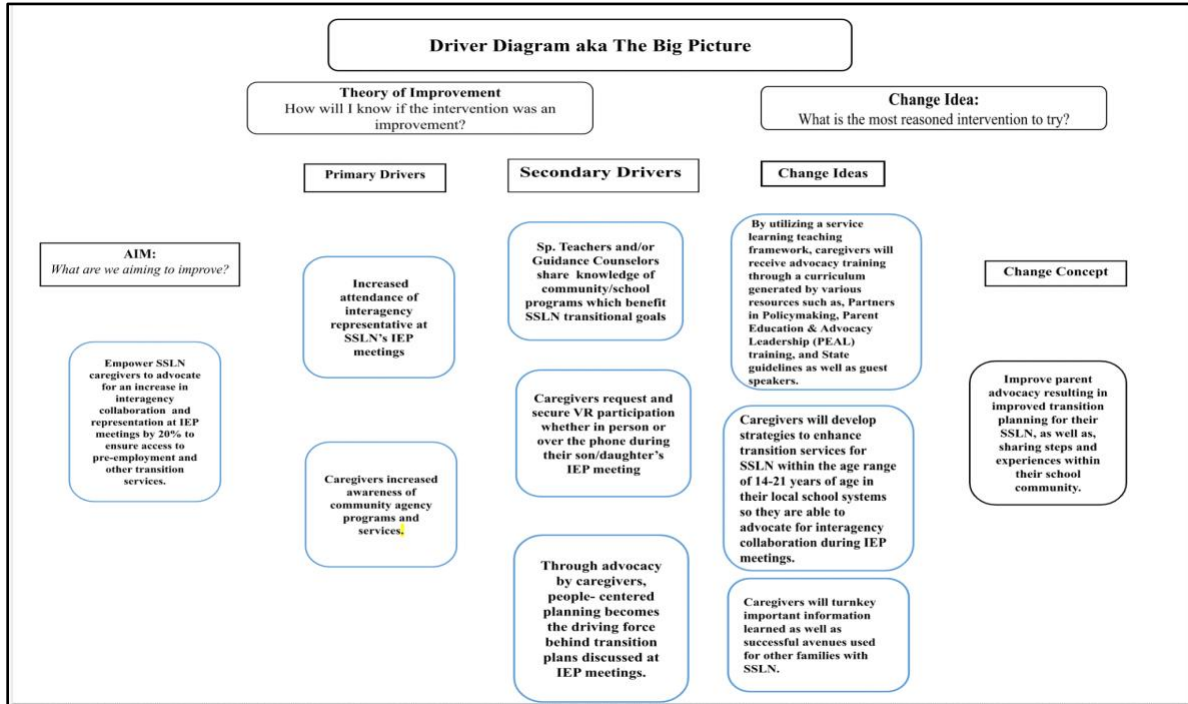
Figure 1 Driver Diagram

2.2.3 Aim

My aim is to empower caregivers of SSLN to advocate for an increase in interagency collaboration and representation at IEP meetings by 20% to ensure access to pre-employment and other post-secondary training. Additionally, caregivers will generate information on how to increase interagency collaboration so other caregivers can easily apply those steps within their community schools.

2.2.4 Primary System Drivers

By increasing caregiver awareness of federal and state policies involving employment training and other skills transition services, caregivers will advocate for interagency collaboration during IEP meetings so their SSLN's transition plan is strength-based and person-centered. It is

essential that CLD caregivers' and SSLNs (Students with Special Learning Needs)' voices drive the direction of the transition plan while the special education school system and professionals provide avenues for exploration, which is the process of the general education population. A part of growth and discovery is allowing students to explore within the middle school and high school years to help build self-determination skills and career goals. By silencing or dismissing the voice of the SSLN and caregivers, this population tends to be pigeonholed into standard transition plans with little idea of how to get proper training or who or what services are available to assist them with their personal transition goals.

The IEP process is a major function of the special education program making this an ideal primary driver within my scope of influence. These meetings are a perfect opportunity for the IEP team to include interagency input which can assist the team in developing a transition plan that galvanizes the best possible transition plan for the SSLN. Unfortunately, this opportunity tends to be lost due to a lack of understanding about the need or the availability of community resources for the caregiver's SSLN. It is uncertain if school districts or the special education teachers are fully aware of the resources or the necessity to begin this process earlier in the SSLN's education, therefore, arming the caregivers with the knowledge and the support to lead the transitional plan development becomes a paramount task, especially for CLD caregivers who tend to live in under resourced school districts.

2.2.5 Secondary System Driver

Research on secondary transition practices has indicated that an increase in interagency collaboration maximizes service delivery and support for SSLN as they transition out of the public school system (Plotner et al., 2016). Utilizing a team approach when developing IEPs (Individual Education Plan) is a strength of special education programs, yet it is seldom practiced. Recent

research and policy development on a federal and state level has called for more interagency collaboration to strengthen transition programs due to the alarming and consistently low post-secondary outcomes for SSLN. However, there is little collaboration that has been documented or researched (Plotner et al., 2020). In the 2021-2022 school year, there were 1,510,000 students in the public school system of Pennsylvania between 14-21 years old with an IEP which had an active transition plan. Only 1,206 of those students had an Early Reach representative from the office of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) attend their IEP meeting. In other words, a VR representative attended only .08% of the outstanding IEP meetings (*Employment First Data Dashboard*, 2022). When caregivers can work with the special education team to develop a consistent educational plan, self-determination skills can be developed through the transition program of SSLN. This offers an opportunity for the SSLN to have successful and authentic post-secondary outcomes. For this to happen, caregivers, teachers, and administrators need to have a working understanding of the resources available in the community and the school system.

2.2.6 Change Agent

A common need for parents with SSLN is the support from other parents, especially sharing the techniques used to access services. There is an important oral history that produces a connectedness surrounding this joint endeavor of caregivers to SSLN. It solidifies a human (parental) bond and one that is vital to their children's well-being. This connection can be found in a formal structure like advocacy groups, but it originates through social interactions at training hosted by community agencies, school systems and social media. These connections are paramount to caregivers as they seek to secure individualized schooling followed by post-secondary programs. A study conducted by Ren et al., (2020) confirmed that social support is "a protective factor for excessive anxiety". It is important for caregivers to receive support from their

family, friends, or other people in the community to help them reduce the anxiety of being a parent with a SSNL.

From the point of view and the experiences of a caregiver, who participated in my earlier focus group, she shared that the school system does not always provide the needed support due to financial restraints and/or contracting with agencies that run pre-determine programs which force SSLN into one of their options. This creates barriers for SSLN who do not fit into those parameters, and the school systems are unable to respond to individualized needs, desires, or hopes of SSLN (personal communication, caregiver, March 24, 2022). An additional barrier is the inability of many marginalized caregivers to make the needed connections at training or other group activities. The isolation created serves to further disadvantage SSLN and caregivers (Rossetti & Burke, 2018).

Through the IEP process designed by special education law, schools are required to provide transitional planning within each SSLN's IEP. These mandates tend to produce performative measures and do not prove that school districts or caregivers are gaining access to important community agencies, specifically VR services. As shown through the PA Open Data source (2022), OVR has attended 0.7% of IEP meetings stating issues with staff shortages and other time restraints. Since many families do not have an open OVR case, local agency services are seldom available during the secondary school years since OVR funds the program. This issue will be further discussed later in the paper.

Many times, this leaves marginalized families isolated and overwhelmed as they scramble to find appropriate programs and funding for their son or daughter. By creating a space where local agencies can interact with caregivers as well as share the various steps needed to acquire their support services, caregivers are able to learn extremely important knowledge on how to create transition plans to better serve the SSLN as s/he leaves the secondary learning environment.

24

2.2.7 Driver Measures

According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020), driver measures are a leading indicator that the improvement theory is working toward the goal of improvement. According to Bennett & Provost (2015), "primary drivers are high-level elements in the system that must be addressed to accomplish the outcome, and the secondary drivers are the actionable approaches, places, or opportunities within the system where change will occur." The special education system is a large and cumbersome system with little meaningful oversight on implementing the regulations or adhering to the policies. Being able to "see the system" in its entirety while focusing on my position of influence within the school system leads me to the mandatory IEP paperwork and my experience working for an outside agency LVCIL. By having dual access to the school system and an important community agency, I can expand my area of influence within these two positions as I strategically work with caregivers to gain knowledge and access to interagency services, as well as access and knowledge of the IEP process for SSLN.

Through the development of PEG at the LVCIL, I will increase the knowledge base of caregivers by meeting bi-monthly for three to four months in late winter and early spring of 2023. Data will be collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews to measure the understanding of community services and any increase in advocacy taken by the caregiver.

These measures will cover three vital steps needed for positive and strength-based transition plans:

1. Increasing the understanding of and the purpose of local community agencies.

2. The ability of the caregiver to secure in-person or virtual participation of these agencies at their SSLN's IEP meeting.

3. Parental satisfaction with their SSLN transition program and their role in its development.

25

Data will be collected through surveys and poll questions provided at various agency presentations. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted throughout the PEG programing The surveys will be designed to gauge the caregiver's new awareness of the numerous services requested to be incorporated into the SSLN's transition plan and the steps taken to get these services enacted into the SSLN transition plan.

2.2.8 Outcomes Measures

The lagging outcome measures will be correlated to increased transitional services provided to SSLN. Agencies such as Medicare and Social Security, and VR are large systems fraught with navigation issues, and other local agencies can be equally difficult such as finding affordable and safe housing or fulfilling employment. The study would be considered successful if the participants could identify the community agencies needed to provide individualized transition services and obtain access to them. Data for these measures will be collected through a focus group/small group interviews conducted at the conclusion of the program, which will be in April.

The leading outcome measures will be correlated to the increased level of advocacy of the caregivers as they seek to gain transitional services through the IEP process. Through participation in the PEG, caregivers will increase their knowledge of the services required by law and the funding offered through government agencies. They will seek representation of these organizations during their SSLN's IEP where these services can be discussed, allowing the school systems to become an equal partner in the development of their SSLN transitional plan. Finally, caregivers will work together to develop a method to share their experiences in their local community. Data for these measures will be collected through small groups and one-on-one interviews.

2.2.9 Process Measures

The main theme of the PEG is to increase the advocacy skills of its participants so they can access the needed transition services. During this process, it would be important to help parents navigate each school district's specific barriers and those that seem universal. In *Improvement Science in Education,* Hinnant-Crawford (2020, p142) discusses Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as allowing students to do three things according to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995): "(a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop critical consciousness enabling them to challenge the status quo of the current social order." These principles will be necessary questions to rework utilizing a parental point of view.

The process measures will be periodically captured through Zoom polling when the PEG meets virtually. The polling questions will be based on the following CRP questions:

    (a) Caregivers must experience advocacy success.

    (b) Caregivers must be able to advocate for culturally responsive programing within his/her SSLN's transition plan during an IEP or other type of school meeting.

    (c) Caregivers will become knowledgeable on local services and programs to select an appropriate program to advocate for their SSLN.

The PEG will be developed from December 2022 through January 2023. During this time, through assistance with employees at LVCIL, I will develop a flier to collect my participant group. In January 2023, our PEG will be assembled. At the beginning of our sessions, and to welcome the participants, the participants will attend an Open House celebration to mingle with the other participants. During the Open House, participants will complete an initial survey to determine their baseline knowledge of parental rights and transition program for SSLNs. After the Open House I will conduct individual or small group interviews to gain specific information about their desires

27

or goals for the SSLN. Additionally, I will capture their level of advocacy and sense of empowerment within their SSLN's IEP team.

Through January until May, the PEG will meet bi-monthly. These sessions will be designed to expose caregivers to various agencies from a local and national perspective. The curriculum will seek to incorporate a service-learning framework to inspire a collective mindset where families seek to tackle the persistent issues within the special education system. The curriculum will consist of material from Partners in Policymaking and Parent Education and Advocacy Leadership (PEAL) and guest speakers from various agencies. As the bi-monthly sessions proceed, caregivers will be asked to focus on their growing sense of empowerment and voice within the special education system. Additionally, participants will participate in focus groups and semi structured interviews based on lesson topics of PEG. During these sessions, discussion will be focused on defining the needed information to access resources, information that prolonged or created too much confusion surrounding resources, and what format would best suit sharing of these tips. These types of questions provide a deeper understanding of the needs of the caregivers and should help to create a richer resource (Gilson et al., 2017).

2.2.10 Balance Measures

As the caregivers share and discuss their experiences during Zoom meetings, responses from the caregivers will be coded to indicate if there is an alleviation of stress or a decrease of it, as well as any responses specific to the CRP questions. It will be important to monitor which caregivers or SSNL have had positive experiences and gained access to the various activities within the CRP questions to ensure that there are equitable increases for all demographics of participants. By monitoring this phenomenon, the intersectionality of potential barriers can be documented and addressed through adjustments.

3.0 Study/Sample Population

My theory of improvement materialized as I shifted through findings generated from my earlier focus group and surveys prior to my DiP. As I analyzed the initial measurements to understand the system, it became apparent that caregivers would need to be active participants in their SSLN's transitional planning to ensure individualized services were provided. Through my internship experience at the LVCIL, I related to a wider range of professionals, caregivers, and SSLN which expanded themes and concepts of my original findings. Since LVCIL serves the Lehigh and Northampton counties, I was able to expand the demographic status of my population.

Additionally, I will specifically seek participants from a local city school district to ensure diversity within the parent support group. The size of my sample population will not exceed 20 members. I am interested in attaining up to 20 caregivers with SSLN in the age range of 14-21 years of age. I will utilize a snowball sampling method based on the staff at LVCIL. This method identifies potential participants through existing networks. This method will rely on the leadership team of LVCIL and their personal school contacts. They have proven to be a well-connected source that can recommend participants who would benefit from this experience or local agencies who could help recruit caregivers. I will continually seek to balance the sample population by evenly recruiting representatives from the four school districts, whose demographic information was provided earlier. Also, LVCIL has experience working with parent groups and can offer suggestions on how to best create a broad and representative parent sample. Finally, the snowball sampling method takes advantage of participants' connections by asking a participant, who is unable to participate, if they may know of an alternative contact (Gilson et al., 2017; Mertens, 2020, p. 333).

4.0 Methods

4.1 Sources of Data and Data Collection Methods

I will select 20 caregivers, who have SSLN within the age range of 14-21 from local high schools in the Lehigh Valley area. The schools will range from suburban settings with a diverse economic and demographic student population to an urban setting with less of a diverse economic and demographic student population. The data for the *driver measures,* collected from the initial survey captured within the month of January, 2023, will measure the caregivers' baseline knowledge of the understanding and the purpose of local community agencies, the ability of the caregiver to secure in-person or virtual participation of these agencies at their SSLN's IEP meeting, and parental satisfaction with their SSLN transition program and their role in its development. This same survey will be utilized at the end of the program to capture any growth in these areas.

In January, the participants will attend bi-monthly sessions utilizing the PEG curriculum *(See Appendix 1.2 and Table 1)* Each session will cover topics pertaining to federal and state laws, corresponding policies, waivers, and other transition services. The curriculum is designed to increase awareness of services, best practice for optimum transition plans, and confidence in how to advocate strength-based and people centered transitional outcomes. By delivering the curriculum through a service-learning framework, caregivers will build ownership of the curriculum and overall direction of the program. Throughout the PEG sessions, outcome measures will be collected through focus group/small group interviews.

The outcome *measure* data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with specific participants. The interview questions will discuss the satisfaction of the caregivers in their advocacy experiences. Questions would be based on the Zoom poll questions and suggestions on improving transition planning. The end of the year celebration will take place in June of 2023. As

part of the celebration, the participants will gather as we share food to discuss their experience and discuss pathways for sharing their experiences within their community.

5.0 PDSA Cycle

5.1 Overview

As a veteran special education teacher, it was important to understand various aspects of transition planning to better guide my students throughout their academic pursuits. In my role as the main facilitator of the IEP, it is important for me to understand how interagency collaboration could be woven into SSLN's transition plan and how best to support caregivers in advocating for their child. By working through the LVCIL, I will coordinate a series of PEG events that will focus on various outside agencies and their work to empower SSLN and provide pre-employment and post-secondary education. Through this exposure caregivers will enhance their son's/daughter's post-secondary education outcomes.

5.2 Plan

During the month of December, I will collaborate with a LVCIL staff member to design a flier that will be sent to principals, Special Education administrators, and teachers who could recommend potential families who would benefit or be interested in becoming a member of a parents' advocacy group. To start, I will reach out to two urban school districts (Bethlehem and Allentown School Districts) and two suburban/rural areas (Parkland and Northampton School Districts). I would like to have 20 families involved with the study. The requirements for my participants will be families who have a son or daughter aged 14 years old to the maximum age of 21 years of age. Ideally, I would like to have ten caregivers from an urban school district and ten caregivers from a suburban/rural school district. Since LVCIL was established in the community and has an excellent reputation, I will seek help gaining participants.

Once the participants are established, the group will attend an open house celebration to meet and establish the goals of the PEG. At this event, parents will be asked to complete a survey to establish a baseline on their experience and knowledge of local agencies and the steps required to gain their services. During the first month of PEG, I will contact parents to conduct an interview to gauge their baseline experience and their expectations for the group. During this time, I will explain the overall goal of the program is to provide advocacy training through a curriculum generated by various resources from local, state, and federal agencies. The presentations will be provided by the various guest speakers from the different organizations (See Appendices 3-10).

Through this training, caregivers will develop strategies to enhance transition services for SSLN within the age range of 14-21 years of age in their local school systems. Caregivers will seek to enhance their SSLN's transition planning by advocating for interagency collaboration during IEP meetings. Lastly, caregivers will share valuable information learned as well as successful avenues used for other families with SSLN. Parents will be guided through the Early Reach VR process to obtain and apply to VR and other agency services. Caregivers will meet bi-monthly. The meetings will be held on the first and third Wednesday of the month. The meetings will be organized to be an in-person meeting from 6 pm to 8am or on Zoom from 6 pm-7 pm.

As the PEG sessions progress, the same caregivers will take more action steps to secure interagency representation at their SSLN's IEP meeting. During this time, PEG events will guide the participants through steps to seek agency support, especially Early Reach OVR. Through the PEG's curriculum and presentations, the caregivers will be armed with knowledge of the importance of having a local agency representative such as OVR attend or advise at the meet so the IEP team can discuss transition options and goals for their SSLN. I predict that the advocacy training will help to enlighten parents on the importance of collaborative efforts when developing

transitional plans for their child and empower them on how to seek out these services. I believe approximately 20% of the SSLN parents will secure the support from a local agency as well as pursue gaining access to case manager from the office of VR.

5.3 Do

By mid-December, I will begin to solicit potential participants with the assistance of staff members within LVCIL. Parents will be selected through suggestions from administration from all four school districts and input from the LVCIL leadership team. In January during the 2022-2023 school year, the Parent Group sessions will begin, and caregivers will participate in instructions on how to obtain transition services. Initially, I will document the baseline knowledge parents have of services offered and if the families have access to VR services for their son/daughter. From the baseline, I predict that the number of parents who have obtained and completed a VR application will increase by 20% (N=4) by the end of March.

For some families, I predict that caregivers will experience inadequate or no feedback from VR, which will affect the ability to obtain a VR case manager. However, by developing a support network among the families through the PEG events, caregivers can support each other in this endeavor by providing suggestions and support. The support network will help families solve common issues rather than becoming so overwhelmed or discouraged that they do not follow through on successfully obtaining a case manager for their SSLN. I predict that 95% (n=19) of the parents in the advocacy group will submit a VR application by the Spring semester and 20% (n= 4) of the caregivers will have an open VR case with an assigned case manager. This will be documented through Zoom polls and surveys.

As the PEG events continue, caregivers will have been exposed to various training organizations (Partners in Policy Making and PEAL) and guest speakers. Therefore, the caregivers will begin to brainstorm what will be the best avenues for other caregivers to receive the same information. Through the service-learning framework, caregivers will take active steps in advocating for services available for their SSLN and how to advocate for other families with similar issues. The PEG will develop common goals specific to community agency services and what transition services would be most relevant to their community. I will continue to document the process and balance measures through the Zoom polls and discussion responses.

Through the PEG training and discussions within the parental support group, caregivers will seek more persistently to have a VR case manager attend their son's/ daughter's IEP meeting. I predict three out of the four parents with an active VR case will have the case manager attend their SSLN's IEP meeting. Due to the IEP process this will increase the likelihood that the student will participate in community transition programs within the next school year. Since I am predicting only a small percentage of caregivers will obtain a case manager to attend their son's/daughter's IEP meeting, caregivers will begin to acquire advocates to assist in securing transition services, specifically to VR services. By increasing the submission of applications to VR services, caregivers will increase their awareness of transition services available to them, and I predict that they will adamantly seek to implement them via the IEP process. This will be measured through the Zoom poll questions.

5.4 Study

I plan to use two main methods of data collection throughout the PDSA cycles. The first method will be pre- and post- surveys to capture baseline of knowledge and current services of local agencies and capturing any increase of services as the study progresses. Surveys will be

implemented starting January 2023, and then concluding in May of 2023 at the end of the program. This will provide quantitative data on the effectiveness of the parental advocacy framework. The final survey in May would capture any increase of active local agency services by documenting the name of the agency, if they attended an IEP meeting, and any plans to implement transition services within the next school year. Another additional survey will be poll questions asked during Zoom session. These quick surveys will serve as process and balance measures to help maintain focus on the study's aim and desired outcome.

As the second method I will conduct structured interviews with selected and willing participants involved with the PEG sessions. The interviews will capture qualitative aspects of the study; highlighting the successes or struggles of the families. The data will be coded by common themes to uncover any trends of commonality within the process of obtaining transition services. It is important to capture the voice of the parents and/or students as they proceed in obtaining these services. Ideally, this will help to formulate and streamline the steps that the PEG plans to share with other caregivers within their community.

5.5 Act

My goal is to increase the access SSLN have to quality postsecondary training and/or education prior to aging out of public education. The most effective way to accomplish this is by empowering the caregivers with knowledge on how to access the needed transition services. Most of the funding and programs for transition skills come from local VR agencies. Therefore, it is essential that caregivers advocate for their son or daughter to have an open and active case with their local VR agency. By empowering the parents with knowledge about federal mandates and the process in obtaining VR and other local agency services, students with ID will receive better transition services directly ensuring brighter adult outcomes than the current trend.

5.6 Methods & Measures

Due to collaborating with LVCIL my measures may be influenced by their input and desired outcomes for the Parent Group. I will provide three sample surveys (see appendix A.1.1-3) and a suggested outline of the study with sources and a suggested timeline. This will be shared and discussed as I meet to develop the flier and program structure at the beginning of December 2022.

5.7 Analysis of Data: Process

Survey data, provided by caregivers on their awareness of employment-based community agencies, will be generated through Google Forms and then sent to them electronically at their email address. These surveys *(See Appendix 3)* will first be processed through the Google program but will be transferred to Excel for final analysis. Data gained through recorded interviews will be transcribed then read for common themes. Once common themes are identified, they will be coded through color coordination to better isolate them and statements. Data charts will be created through Pivotal Tables in Excel. Direct quotes will be drawn from the transcripts to be sorted and charted by themes. Through the analysis process, I will gather data indicating the successful aspects of the PEG curriculum and the areas that need improvement. This will lead to a clear format so that the process can be repeated in other agencies and within other areas of services that SSLN may need to successfully transition to the community.

6.0 PDSA Results

6.1 Plan

6.1.1 Finding Participants

On December 16th, 2022, I contacted the four school districts discussed earlier, some of the outside agencies, and the Intermediate Unit within the Lehigh Valley. I sent emails to various levels of Pupil Service administrators and/or Department Chairs in each of the four districts. I attached a flyer along with the projected curriculum and meeting dates (See Appendices A 1.1-A 1.3).

6.1.1.1 Allentown School District

For the Allentown School District, I sent seven initial emails on December 16th, 2022, and received no responses. On December 29th, 2022, I called a district contact who is a facilitator for one of the high schools. She asked I send her an email and a flyer to her personal email address. I did not hear back from her after our initial communication. Next, I contacted the administration office of the Allentown School District on January 12th, 2023. I spoke with an administrative assistant who told me to follow up with an email to the secondary coordinator for the school district. The administrative assistant told me she would leave her a message explaining my email and indicating that she will be looking for it. The secondary coordinator returned my email on January 18th, 2023, stating that she would post and share the flyer for her parents. I was hopeful that caregivers within the Allentown School District would gain information of the program, but I was disappointed that the information would not reach them prior to the first session of PEG which was the VR presented for that evening.

6.1.1.2 Bethlehem School District

For the Bethlehem School District, I sent seven initial emails on December 16th, 2022, and received an immediate confirmation from one individual, who stated that she would share the flyer with their families. She was the community school coordinator based at an elementary school within an impoverished area of the school district. I was very hopeful but that soon dissipated due to not having any registered participants. I then followed up with the community school coordinator again through email and shared with her an abbreviated version of the flyer *(See Appendices A. 1.1-A. 1.3).* However, I did not receive any further communication from her or any other employee within the Bethlehem School District.

6.1.1.3 Northampton School District

For the Northampton School District, I sent three emails on December 16th, 2022, and received no reply. I found the contact information for the Pupil Service administration on the school district's website. However, two out of the three available contacts did not go through successfully. I double checked the email addresses and attempted to gain their districts information from another source. The emails were identical, so I attempted again. Only one of the email addresses was correct. Since this was not successful, I attempted to reach out to the school district by phone. On January 12th, 2023, I attempted to call the school district again and left a voice mail, but my phone call was not returned.

I decided to contact a parent in the school district with a child with a developmental disability. When I asked her for a good contact person, she disclosed that the school district, specifically the Pupil Services department, was under scrutiny due to a PowerPoint presentation stating that any child with an SSLN included in the general education environment would not be able to score higher than a 2 out of a 4 on the State rubric. Essentially stating that these students

would never be able to score above a Basic. Throughout the PEG program I would share with her information on services and contacts to help her and the other families confront this horrific policy. Though none of the parents attended, a representative from the ARC of Lehigh and Northampton County attended a few sessions.

6.1.1.4 Parkland High School

For the Parkland School District, I sent five emails on December 16th, 2022, and received no reply. I followed up by calling the high school coordinator to discuss the program, its purpose, and what I was asking from my fellow high school teacher and the school district. She agreed to post the flyer on the parent portal. I followed up with the Life Skills and other learning support teachers stating that the program was approved by the school coordinator. As requested by the Life Skills and other learning support teachers, I printed out copies of the flyer and the curriculum timetable so they could send it home with their students.

6.1.1.5 Overall Experience

Despite these efforts, I was not getting any participants registering for the program. I recreated an abbreviated version of the flyer (See *Appendix A.1.3*) and highlighted that there would be refreshments and a raffle for a $40 Target gift card. At the same time, I requested that LVCIL continue to reach out to their contacts as well as post the flyers on their social media page. I also continued to build on the curriculum and schedule guest speakers from important local agencies. I knew that this would be an important hook to get parents to commit to two evenings a month for the next few months. This proved to be the case. Once I was able to secure Representative Michael Schlossberg and add him to the curriculum timetable, I started to generate some interest among caregivers and local agencies.

Despite gaining some traction, Representative Schlossberg was scheduled for the third event, and I was not getting any interest in the first two events. I decided to visit a local franchise, Bitty & Beau Coffee Shop, located in downtown Bethlehem. Its business model is focused on providing inclusive work experience for young adults with disabilities. The owner of the store is a caregiver of a young woman with a developmental disability. Additionally, her daughter was a recent graduate from Parkland High School. The owner did agree to share my information with her employees and offered her shop as a location for any sessions. I had asked if she would like to attend the first PEG session as a veteran caregiver to share her experience as she secured services for her child's transition plan. Unfortunately, she was not available, and there was no further communication.

Since my first session was with the local VR organization, I thought they might be a good source in contacting local families. I called their office three times before a representative called me back. This representative had an exceptionally good working relationship with LVCIL, which I think was the leading reason for returning my communication. She did agree to present for PEG, but the local VR office did not distribute the flyer or provide me with any potential participant information. As the first PEG session approached, I was extremely disappointed with having only one participant registered to attend the event.

My plan for recruiting twenty willing parents who would dedicate their time to attending meetings twice a month was proving to be extremely difficult. Despite the success of the first two sessions, they were attended by only one participant and her son. I will discuss the benefit of this dynamic and the amazing change to her son's transition plan in a later section, but it was disappointing that not more families were able to get the vital information that was shared. The first broadly attended session was with Representative Michael Schlossberg. This event was

successful in that it established the PEG as credible to the community and to other local agencies, especially LVCIL. Registration began to pick up, but I was still not able to recruit heavily in the four specified school systems. My specific recruiting areas became broad, as I was happy to just increase attendance to the events.

One example was the unexpected interest of caregivers and agency representation from the Bucks County Center for Independent Living (BCCIL) in the PEG program. The LVCIL has an impeccable reputation within the community for the length and extent of their programs. The BCCIL has been attempting to increase their services and connection within their community. Additionally, BCCIL has recently hired new leadership, who reached out to the LVCIL leadership to get guidance on programing. From these discussions, they were directed to PEG and its curriculum. After some discussion and attending a few of the PEG events, a small group of caregivers and BCCIL employees are planning to start their own PEG program at their branch.

I attempted to contact some of the caregivers to conduct a semi-structure interview but to no avail. However, the BCCIL employee spearheading their program did meet with me for an interview. According to the BCCIL representative, a few parents became motivated by the events hosted by PEG. From their experience and growing motivation, the parents organized their program, so 30 to 34 parents were motivated to register for it. The BCCIL stated that our information sessions were deemed especially important for the group. As it stands, we are interested in collaborating and potentially working together next year.

Despite these successes in increasing participation, there is a sense of separation within the special education community that is hard to ignore. This separation was discussed in the interview with the BCCIL administrator. The administrator shared her frustrating experiences when attempting to ensure a broad range of participation of the caregivers within the community. She

stated that it has been challenging at times, especially having diverse families interact. There is a geographic difference in the county where the Upper Bucks and the Lower Bucks families do not interact. As stated by the BCCIL representative, "For some reason, there is a mental divide between Lower and Upper Bucks County. They just do not mix." I witnessed the same phenomenon when interacting with the various school district employees and representatives from local agencies in the Lehigh Valley. There was a competitive air between agencies during many of these interactions. Many organizations replicate services which gives them the sense of competition for the participant. It was an observation that was not expected but created a level of curiosity piquing my interest to study this phenomenon in the future as I continue to break down the special education system.

Overall, this barrier influenced my ability to establish a service-learning framework within the PEG program. It appears that solidifying the caregivers to commit to the PEG program was much more difficult than initially thought. Additionally, most of the parents displayed a sense of exhaustion and could only muster enough effort to advocate for their own son or daughter. The PEG program has not been running long enough to build the necessary reputation or sense of community to help family's bond through a service-learning project.

Additionally, I was unable to create a diversified group of parents (See *Appendices A.2.1-A.2.2*). Despite making multiple personal and professional attempts to connect with the two urban school districts, I was unsuccessful in making any meaningful contact. This seemed to be an on-going issue within both the LVCIL and the BCCIL agencies. Their frustration was expressed as they tried to expand their services into school districts with less resources. In the planning strategies of the PEG program, a LVCIL administrator frequently discussed the barriers that their organization would confront when trying to work with the Allentown residents. Similarly, the

BCCIL representative stated, "… [services rendered, or the awareness of the services depends on] the person in the position, not necessarily the position." This statement sums up an aspect of the systemic barriers that created a performative system when it comes to special education. Too many times, quality services depend on who the individual caregiver knows rather than the diagnosis or need of the SSLN. It begs the question of how equity are the State and Federal programs, moreover the access to their funding when the disparities are so rampant within the local systems.

In the end, the PEG events were attended by various participants from a minimal variety of demographic areas. As a means to organize the participant data and to maintain anonymity of the participants the previously described school districts were renamed using a generalized classification. The participant's home district will be identified according to these generalized classifications (*See Table 3*)

Table 3 School Classification

Classification	Model School	Characteristics of School
Class A	Allentown School District	large by population, urban public school district; low income
Class B	Bethlehem Area School District	large by population, urban public school district; medium income
Class C	Northampton School District	medium by square acreage, suburban/country public school district; medium income
Class D	Parkland School District	large by square acreage, suburban public school district; upper medium income

As shown in *Table 4*, the participants (n=18) were mostly from the same two School Classification Code. The majority of participants (n=13) were either from a Class C or a Class D school district. When a participant was enrolled in a Class A (n=1), they attended a single event with no further communication or interaction with in PEG. This is important to note since a Class A school has a higher percentage of poverty and a higher percentage of students enrolled within the school district. Ideally, caregivers from a Class A school should statistically have greater representation within an equitable community program (See *Table 2*). Additionally, parents from a Class A school have a greater CLD population (See *Table 1*), and as discussed earlier, CLD caregivers do not statistically have equal access to federal or state programs. These findings illustrate the extent of the inequitable special education system, and the effects of these practices within the school system and community agencies for SSLN who are a part of a CLD community.

Table 4 School Classificiation of Participants

School Classification Code	Number of Participants
Class A	1
Class B	2
Class C	5
Class D	8
Unknown	2
Grand Total	18

6.1.2 Developing the Curriculum

Table 5 Parent Empowerment Curriculum

Parent Empowerment Curriculum		
Date: **Month, Day,** **Location**	**Topics**	**Guest Speaker/source**
January 18th at LVCIL 6-8 pm	Introduction to Transition Plans and their importance OVR sign-up	OVR/ Early Outreach coordinator Previous Parent at LVCIL
Feb 1st at LVCIL 6-8 pm	Transition Plan: Matching Needs with Programs People Centered Planning**:** *Getting the Right Kind of Inclusion for your Child*	LVCIL Professors/ Other Past participants in Process
Feb 15th on Zoom 6-7	Legislation Explained Monies and Area programs	Representative Michael Schlossberg
March 15th Zoom 6-7	C2P2 Partners in Policymaking	Institute on Disabilities at Temple University Discussion Panel/Questions
April 12th at Zoom 6-8	Post-Secondary Education v. Pre-Employment Training	LCCC SEED Program LCTI Adult training program Pre-Employment Options
April 26th Zoom 6-7	The IEP Meeting Checklist- Knowing what to look and ask for Pre-during -& Post IEP meeting	PaTTAN
May 10th at LVCIL 6-8 pm	The What's, The Why's, and the How's of advocating	Transition Discoveries
May 24th Zoom 6-7	The What's, The Why's, and the How's of advocating *Rightful Presence*	SWiFT Education Center
June 7th at LVCIL 6-8	Wrapping it all up Celebration Where do we go from here? Thoughts	Looking at the Greater Community: Sharing Information Discussion Panel/Questions

There is no shortage of phenomenal programs and services available to SSLNs in the Lehigh Valley or statewide. I gained much knowledge through developing the curriculum and meeting people within each of the organizations who presented (See Table 5). Each presenter was able to share a great deal of information that was pertinent to caregivers and their child, and there

were some significant improvements to SSLNs transition plans and exposure to pre-employment and post-secondary education services. I will expand on how the curriculum and interacting with the agencies and other parents helped to build advocacy skills for several caregivers.

Additionally, as the curriculum was implemented the caregivers became aware of options and steps that they could take for their SSLN. It was interesting to witness how the different sessions would impact the caregivers' differently, even though, their overall goals were similar. Some of the participant feedback (*Table 6)* represents a varied point of view, but with an underlining theme of empowerment through awareness. These statements will be explored and further explained throughout the paper, as well.

Table 6 Caregiver Statements about PEG

Participant Response	Is there any information that you learned from PEG that has made an impact on how you will approach your next IEP meeting?
Respondent 1	absolutely! Putting son at the center of the meeting and ensuring that his hopes and dreams are part of the conversation.
Respondent 2	I think that PATTAN is an exemplary organization.
Respondent 3	No
Respondent 4	I am new to the Group, so I was not able to attend sessions.
Respondent 5	No
Respondent 6	Hold School District more accountable
Respondent 7	Love hearing from the experts, as well as the other parents… Also came to realize that we should be setting the tone for the entire IEP meeting versus fearing the meeting

6.2 Do

The beginning of my program did not go as I planned due to not attracting participants until later into the scheduled sessions. For the first session, one participant (Participant 26) attended with her son. As a family, they had been struggling to a develop a workable transition plan for her son. He was scheduled to graduate from high school at the end of the school year. He was an extraordinary student diagnosed with autism as well as academically gifted. Participant 26 is a general educator in a local school district, so she felt that she was familiar with the education

system. She explained that she was frequently looked upon as the expert at her son's IEP meetings, and the IEP team leaned on her suggestions for her son's program. This is ideal if the parent is well informed. However, she stated that she did not realize how unaware she was until she started attending the PEG program.

As stated previously, Participant 26 was the only caregiver to attend the first two PEG events. This was an amazing opportunity for this family. Her son was registered as a senior at a local Class D high school. Since he was gifted academically, Participant 26's son skipped second grade and entered third grade as an eight-year-old. She explained that some of his autistic behaviors were misunderstood by many of his teachers which caused him to have issues throughout the school system. Participant 26 and her son recounted continuous patterns with some of his academic teachers, who would struggle to understand his neurodiverse behaviors, such as not making eye contact or seemingly not listening to the lesson. He would also have some stimming behaviors that would be considered misbehaving. There was a heavy sense of responsibility that Participant 26 felt for her son's academic experience and any behavioral issues that might have occurred in the school system. She took full ownership of the academic decision of having him within the general education program as well as skipping a full school year. She seemed to be mindful of the uniqueness of her requests for her son's academic program and was hesitant to seek more from the school system. As she participated with the PEG program, she frequently stated that this information could not have come in a timelier manner. By participating in the PEG sessions and meeting other caregivers and professionals, caregiver became increasingly aware of the potential and options for their SSLN's transition plan (See *Table 7*).

Table 7 Caregiver Lack of Information

Participant Response	Lack of information and/or access to
Participant 26	*I haven't known what to ask for* I was aware of VR services but I was not aware of what they could offer I didn't know anything about waiver or other funding sources
Participant 29	I didn't know. I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't know what was available for my "disabled" child *I don't really understand [district transition activities]* I didn't know I could expect my questions to be documented in the IEP paperwork I didn't know I had authority; I didn't know that there was opportunity for my daughter to direct it
BCCIL Representative	Need teachers to get the information out to parents Parents do not know what to do after their children age out of school *It's all overwhelming just to figure it out* We get a lot of calls from young adults who were done with their services or didn't qualify for something and wanted to know what they could do for them. This is a very difficult demographic to work with and help.

During the VR presentation, the representative, who was an Early Reach coordinator, explained the options for pre-employment training. As the VR coordinator explained the program and its purpose, Participant 26 continued to state with wide eyes, "Wow, this is exactly what [her son's name] ***needed***." As I was setting up this session, I was guided by the LVCIL to not be too pushy and to understand that the VR representative might have too much on her plate. Since LVCIL has an excellent reputation and has nurtured a relationship with the local VR office, the VR representative was more receptive to participating in the event. She said she needed clearance from her supervisor but would make it to the session about an hour after it started. My expectation for this event was extremely low, but I was pleasantly surprised at how amazing it turned out. The

VR representative was extremely knowledgeable and because Participant 26's son was present; he was able to have a pre-intake session.

It was an inspiring event to attend due to the expression on the caregiver's and son's faces and their reactions. Immediately after the session, Participant 26 connected with the VR Representative, and her son received services. Additionally, the family arranged an IEP meeting with his team and directed the transition plan to expand her son's time in the public school system by staying on for a thirteen year and begin employment training at the local vocational school in culinary arts lab. This result was a complete reversal of the family's plan, and it was one that they were unaware was an option for her son.

6.2.1 Person Centered Planning
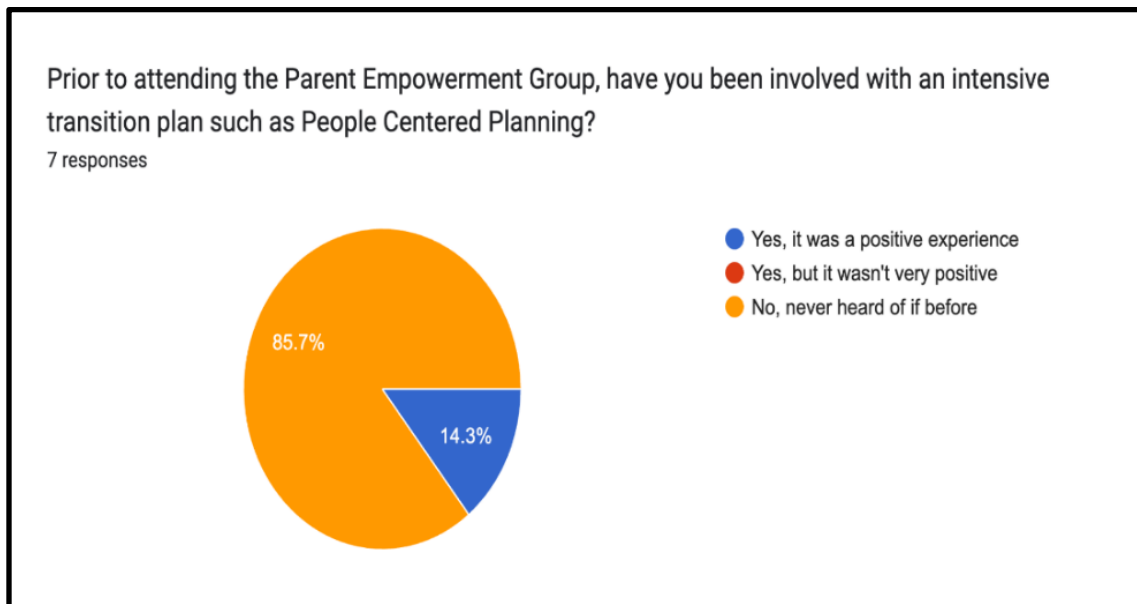
Figure 2 Awareness of PCP

The next event for PEG was on People Centered Planning (PCP). As the PEG program continued throughout the year, I frequently surveyed families on their experience with this type of transition planning (See *Figure 2*). During the process of developing my DiP, I learned about PCP through a focus group interview with caregivers who have SSLN who have aged out of the system,

and an one-on-one interview with a local professor and board member at LVCIL. PCP has been found to improve communication, parental involvement, and social networks for SSLN. It is also an avenue to increase social inclusion, greater independence, and self-determination skills (McCausland et al., 2021). PCP is frequently offered through many of the local agencies, especially ones that seek to empower the SSLN. When I first heard about PCP, I was shocked due to my lack of exposure to it on a professional level. However, the participants of PEG have not heard of it as well. According to a pre-event survey (See *Figure 2*), 86% of the participants indicated that they had never heard of PCP. The remaining 14% of the participants had heard of PCP and it was a positive experience for their son/daughter.

Caregivers have reported that there have been issues when they have sought for the school system to complete or allow an outside agency to provide the PCP service. Another participant, Participant 29, was in a comparable situation as Participant 26. Additionally, these two participants have their children attending the same Class D school system. Participant 29 did not become aware of PEG until late March, and he was not able to attend a session until April 12th, which turned out to be exactly the session he and his daughter needed.

Participant 29's daughter was identified as a student with an Emotional Disorder. She has many behaviors that frustrated the family as well as the school system. However, the district's approach was deficit-based and provided minimum support for his daughter. When I first met him, he was petrified that his daughter was about to graduate, and he did not feel she was emotionally prepared or mentally mature enough to leave the school system. He was concerned that she would get lost and fall through the cracks. The session he attended was post-secondary training and education options at a local community college and the local vocational institute.   Despite my disappointment that there were only four caregivers in attendance it worked out to the participants'

benefit. Participant 29 got in-depth information about two post-secondary programs that would fit his daughter's needs and knowledge about an open house the next evening. He gained a lot of confidence in options which translated to a better transition plan for his daughter.

Prior to and after the session, I was able to help direct Participant 29 to several agencies who would help him decipher his next step with his school district. I provided him with information about PEAL and the contact of the woman who presented at an earlier event. I also got him in touch with the two administrators from LVCIL. Lastly, I gave him contact information for the local VR and Career Link offices. Through all of this he received a crash course in transition planning and the expectations he should have for his daughter. Through contacting PEAL, they reviewed his latest IEP paperwork and advised him of valuable information which he was able to use when he asked for a meeting. He also heard back from VR office. The pace of getting his daughter VR assistance was extremely slow and has yet to occur. However, when his daughter and he went to the open house at the local community college, they personally met the Career Link contact that I had given him. This turned out to be particularly important since his daughter was able to develop a relationship with the representative, which allowed her to become more willing to utilize the services.

Throughout this process, Participant 29 continued to speak with the LVCIL representatives. They discussed employment options, the benefit of staying connected with Career Link, and the potential of completing PCP for Participant 29's daughter. He was preparing to ask the school district to complete a PCP since he believed this would develop a better understanding of his daughter's strengths and preferences. However, it became a sticking point with the district. Due to secondary issues resulting from her diagnosis, the district was interested in having Participant 29's daughter graduate from high school. By having PEAL review his paperwork, this proved to be a

crucial step in getting the district to take his concerns more seriously. They held a meeting in late April where his daughter was able to return as a 13th year student to pursue pre-employment skills and develop a better transition plan.

In a one-on-one interview with Participant 29, he stated that he "never knew or understood what was available for his 'disabled' daughter". He recounted how he prepared questions and concerns for his annual IEP meeting but none of those concerns were present in his paperwork. Not until he consulted PEAL, did he understand the process and how the school district did not communicate adequately the steps taken to prepare his daughter. As it turned out, their preparations were a collective perspective and not one that his daughter had any influence or voice in the matter. Through PEAL, Participant 29 received a *Planning for your Future Checklist (see Appendix A.6),* which was designed by PaTTAN, 21andable.org, United Way Alleghany County, and the Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education. It creates a timeline of activities within the three areas of transition planning into age-appropriate sections. I had seen this form about ten years prior, but it had not been broadly adapted as a transition tool within our district. Participant 29 and Participant 26 both stated that they wished they had this information earlier. It would have made a difference in how they would have navigated the system and what they would have pushed for to better prepare post-secondary transition for their SSLN.

6.3 Study

I predicted that 20% of the participants (n=18) who attended would secure representation from the office of VR to attend their son's/daughter's IEP meeting. I did not achieve my predicted goal specific to VR services. However, the program assisted 11% of the participants (n=2) in gaining access to VR services. Overall, the program assisted 22% of the participants (n=4) in gaining access to VR or other agency services that bolstered their son's/daughter's transition plan.

Despite vocalizing interest, the participants of PEG did not bond as I had initially planned, so caregiver's individualized experiences were not as freely shared with the group. I believe holding the events over Zoom was a major factor for this lack of bonding. The Zoom meetings was the preference of the participants due to their busy schedules, but it was not conducive to the service-learning framework I initially planned on implementing.

Since the PEG group did not form as I had expected, the pre-survey was altered a great deal. Additionally, many of the participants did not complete the surveys when they were shared during the events. To gain enough responses, I had to incorporate the pre-survey questions throughout the programs. I also needed to become more direct with the need to complete the surveys. I would take a five-minute pause in the presentation for participants to complete a five to seven question Google Form survey *(See Appendix A.3)*. By April, I collected data reflecting on how caregivers viewed their knowledge before participating in PEG (See *Figure 3*).

Do you think your child's current transition plan is an accurate depiction of his/her dreams and desires?

7 responses
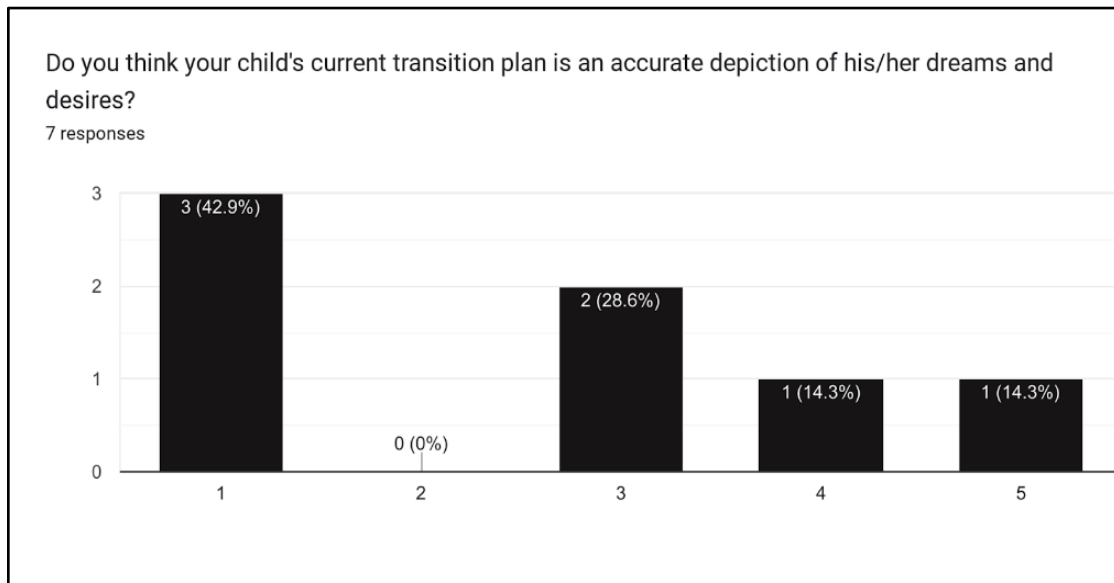
Figure 3 Rating of current Transtion Plan
(Likert Scale: 1=Not at all-5= Spot on)

A common theme I found among the participants was amazement at the services that their SSLN had access to but they were completely unaware of these possibilities. In fact, many parents felt that the school districts had developed average programs for their child. According to results from a pre-survey (*see Figure 3)*, the caregivers' beliefs surrounding their son's/daughter's transition plan were split. Though four out of the seven participants' responses fell in the average or above level of satisfaction, only one family felt the transition plan was spot on for their SSLN. Even though some participants indicated they were satisfied with their child's transition plan in a previous survey question, all believed their son's/daughter's transition plan did not reflect their child (See *Figure 4)*. One of the participants who rated their SSLN's transition plan on the higher end of the Liker Scale commented that she came to the realization through the PEG program that she, as the caregiver should be setting the tone for the IEP meeting, especially concerning the transition plan.
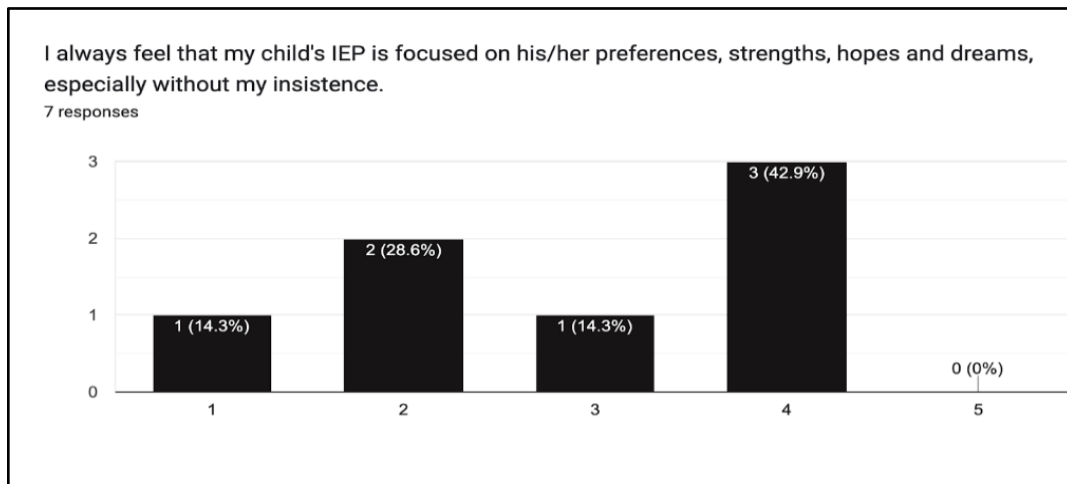
Figure 4 Individualization of Transition Plan

Another interesting result from the pre-survey was the satisfaction that the participants felt concerning the SSLN's IEP reflecting his/her preferences, strengths, and dreams. Opinions varied but most of the caregivers (N=3) rated this high with a 4 out of 5 on the Likert Scale (See *Figure 4)*. The remaining participants varied from average to not at all. As the caregivers progressed

55

through PEG program and became more aware of the various plans and services available, they expressed interest in additional steps and services the families would seek for their SSLN. As the PEG events proceeded, participants began to understand the process more clearly and understood the need to direct the IEP meeting especially the transition plan. By seeking outside agencies support and services, they were able to bring the needed programs to the school district.

Table 8 System Acting in a Perfunctory Manner

Participant Response	System Acting in a Perfunctory Manner
Participant 26	[The support I have received} I have had to specifically ask for There was a limit to what [they] are able to accommodate in a sense of their plan. Their plan is very tunnel vision, sort of, there are only certain things that they can accommodate They connected me with VR but it fizzled out. Son was college bound and we didn't know VR could still be used in that realm [Having knowledge of Early Reach VR] would have been helpful to have their support. Would have given us some direction, some focus and maybe an endpoint that we didn't have, we were playing it week by week; year by year
Participant 29	You get what you ask for. Apparently, unbeknownst to me, there was some things that were done that daughter had to do- daughter had to do it; basic electives. [Transition activities] were the things that were occurring and I was unaware of it; it was never described to me They talked about the rudimentary goals only; making student responsible for the goal None of my concerns were addressed in the IEP
BCCIL Representative	It's the person in the position not necessarily the position If there is no clear expectation of the role then it really just depends on the person who's providing it how much effort do they put in Information is presented in a once and done manner A lot of information and not delivered the same way They all give the information but some do a better job with how detailed or how much its pushed and how available it is Schools are the gatekeepers but also big blockers

As shown in *Table 8*, caregivers and agency representatives identified how the system was not consistent or forthright with options available to SSLN. It became poignantly clear to the caregivers that they would receive from the school system what they were able to ask for. This realization heightened their need to be thoroughly educated in transition programs and other program. With the reauthorization of IDEA, caregivers were identified as the ultimatum advocate for their SSLN. Unfortunately, school districts capitalize on the caregivers' lack of input so they can create transition plans that are not individualized, but more standardized and subpar. Participant 29's experience with his daughter's transition plan is an excellent example of this experience. The BCCIL representative also spoke on this paradox by explaining how the school system is situated to be the gatekeepers for caregivers to receive services and funds available to them from outside agencies but they were also the biggest blocker of this knowledge. The BCCIL representative believed that school systems are not held to a clear expectation on how to deliver information about transition services. Therefore, the extent of services available to SSNL depends more on the individual within the position rather than the position itself (See *Table 8*).

6.4 Act

My goal was to increase the access SSLN have to quality postsecondary training and/or education prior to aging out of public education. To reach this goal, I set my aim on empowering caregivers of SSLN to advocate for an increase in interagency collaboration and representation at IEP meetings by 20% to increase access to pre-employment and other post-secondary training. The PEG program and curriculum armed caregivers with the needed knowledge so they could access transition services, advocate for these services, and create a strengthen based transition plan for their SSLN.

At first, the best avenue was to increase VR presence in their SSLN IEP team. They are frequently held as the gatekeepers to local agencies and participate in many of the programs. For the sake of the PEG program and this current study, I researched issues with VR services, but did not focus on them as the program developed and caregivers began to seek out other needed services. Out of the seven caregivers who shared their results with me, I know one family gained access to VR services and their attendance at an IEP meeting. This participant gained this pathway due to attending the event when the VR-Early Reach coordinator presented. One other participant opened an account but has yet to gain access to a case manager. However, there seemed to be avenues around the lack of VR services and representation and those pathways became the focus of PEG.

Through the presentations of the PEAL Center, Institution on Disabilities C2P2, Transition Discoveries, and SWiFT, caregivers were enlightened of the possibilities for their SSLN. Each presentation helped the participants learn about incredible work taking place in the disability services, and there were some incredible benefits.

6.4.1 The PEAL Center

Understanding transition programs and options

Likert Scale rating 1=completely understand to 5= Not at all

Participants' responses

- Do you understand how to access agencies, programs and funding
- Are you satisfied with the transtion services your child has access to when exploring post-secondary education option?
- Are you satisfied with your child's current transition services that focus on developing pre-empolyment skills?
- Are you satisfied with your child's current transition services that focus on developing post-secondary education options?

Figure 5 Confidence of Understanding Serivces

Ms. Cindy Duch from the PEAL Center presented to 8 participants for over an hour on Zoom. The presenter was a caregiver herself, so her presentation was from her own experience and as an advocate. During the presentation, participants began discussing waivers for their SSLNs. A participant shared that there was some difficulty in getting a diagnosis for her child and he would be aging out of the school system soon. Most of the participants were curious and concerned about this topic. The PEAL presenter provided a contact person for the families and encouraged them to reach out to gain more information about any changes made by the State regarding eligibility for waivers. The next morning, I received a forwarded email from an administrator from LVCIL. He was emailed by a school psychologist who worked for the local IU. She inquired about the presentation and what was said about the waivers. It was difficult to gauge the tone of the email. She did express confusion but dismissing the contact information to gain clarification on the issue in addition to the parental concerns discussed at the presentation. It

would have been helpful if she had reached out to the PEAL Center to help the families who she worked with through the IU to navigate the waiver process. This was the purpose of the participant's email in the first place.

The results from the PEAL Center survey, *(shown in Figure 5),* indicate that participants do not feel confident in their ability to navigate the system to secure services and funding. The PEAL Center would later be contacted by a participant who had not been present for this event. This participant was completely unaware of many local and state resources that could have been utilized during his daughter's schooling. Additionally, he learned valuable jargon to understand the development of a meaningful transition plan. It remains clear that caregivers benefit from interacting with agencies such as PEAL, as well as hearing about the situations other caregivers are dealing with concerning their SSLN.

6.4.2 Institution on Disabilities: C2P2 program

Ms. Jamie C Ray-Leonetti, from the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University presented to seven participants on Zoom. The focus was on their Family Leadership program called C2P2. Many of the families were unaware of the variety of post-secondary programs available for their SSLN through the Institute on Disabilities on the Temple campus. Participant 6 was a caregiver from Buck's County, and she attended two sessions. She was extremely impressed by the information and shared during this presentation. She expressed her gratitude and sense of relief for learning about the information. Her daughter was near the end of her public school education and she did not know what direction she should turn for her daughter. Like the other participants, there were extenuating circumstances in her daughter's story and the C2P2 dynamic would fit her daughter perfectly. She was also interested in other events and services provided by the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University. One factor was that she

was an alum from Temple, and having this in common with her daughter would me the world to both.

6.4.3 Transition Discoveries

Dr. Joan Kester and Ms. Erin Black from Transition Discoveries presented to eight participants on Zoom. There was a lot of valuable information shared during this session which helped to broaden the knowledge of the participants. Though *Figure 6* displays results taken from the Transition Discoveries presentation, the results represent an overall awareness that was cultivated throughout the PEG program. One of the most inspirational aspects of this event was the work that Transition Discoveries was doing to enhance youth voice and presence on a State and local arena. Many of the participants were excited to have an avenue to help their child feel more confident and interact among their peers. Transition Discoveries discussed how their initial survey of caregivers uncovered that developing meaningful age-appropriate relationships was an important concern of caregivers and SSLN. About halfway through the presentation, Participant 24 enthusiastically shared that she loved that Ms. Black, who is 21 years old, is the same age as her son. She believes having peer interaction will help him become more self-directed and help him determine what is possible for his next step. It is more meaningful when he can discuss his future with a person his own age who also has a disability.

Parental Advocacy After PEG Events
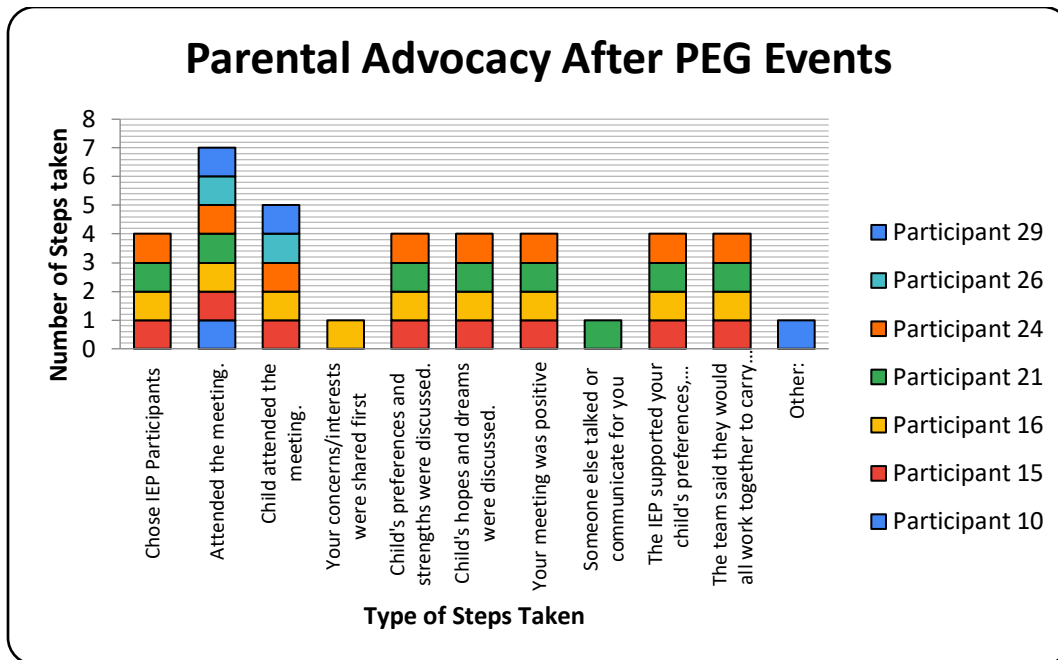
Figure 6 Parental Advocacy after PEG Events

Overall, though not all 30 participants engaged with PEG at the same level, there were many wonderful results that helped to create a more robust transition plan for the SSLN. Overall, eighteen caregivers (n=18) attended at least one of the PEG events. Seven (n=7) participants shared their changes and experiences through the PEG surveys showing that the PEG group affected 39% of the SSLN transition plans in a positive manner.

7.0 Learning & Activities

7.1 Discussion

Overall, there are parents who despite their best efforts are unable to understand the complicated special education system ranging from the paperwork to the jargon to the numerous services available for positive transition planning. Once the system is broken down for them, they are willing to advocate for their child. There are incredible and dynamic programs pioneering some of the best educational reform not only for SSLN, but for all students. An excellent example of such a program is the SWiFT Education Center. SWiFT is recreating the notion of inclusive education practices by implementing Rightful Presence throughout the nation's public school system. SWiFT models the notion that when there is a well-run special education program in a school district it is an indication that the overall system is well-run for all students. For the parents that attended and participated in the PEG events, they immediately utilized the information gained from the session (See Section 8.1 *What did I learn from Improvement?*).
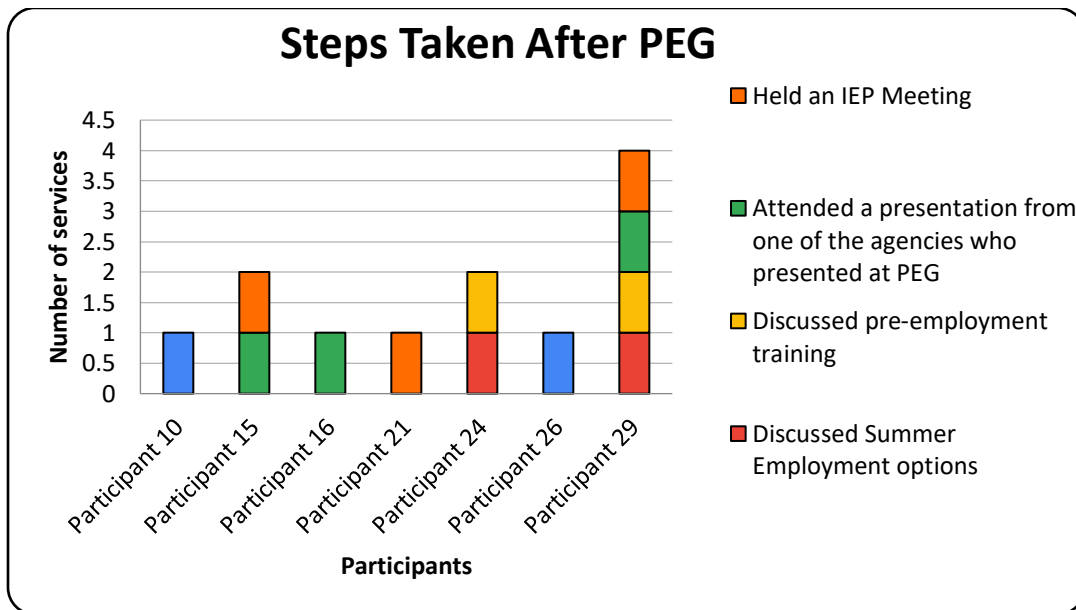
Figure 7 Steps Taken After PEG

As shown in *Figure 7*, there was a clear and positive impact the PEG curriculum and events had on their SSLN transition plan. These findings correlate with the primary drivers within my Theory of Improvement. One of the primary drivers stated that caregivers would increase awareness of community agency programs and services. Out of the seven responding participants six stated an increase in agency support. All seven participants engaged their school district due to the programs discussed through PEG. My second primary driver predicted an increase in attendance of interagency representation at the SSLN's IEP meeting. A more accurate statement for this primary driver would be an increase in the *influence* of interagency services on SSLN's transition plan. Parents would be advised by the agency and then discuss the findings or share their input with the school district. This resulted in an increase of individualized services geared toward the SSLN. As shown in *Figure 7*, all seven of the participants adjusted their child's IEP. The overall break down of increased services is as follows: Out of the seven participants who responded to the survey, 29% (n=2) gained VR services and another 29% (n=2) discussed summer employment option as well as pre-employment training with their school district. Additionally, 43% (n=3) followed up with an agency who presented during PEG and another 43% (n=3) held an additional IEP meeting to address their SSNL's transition plan. The format and the information of the PEG events show effective results.

When looking at the secondary drivers in my study, VR services did increase by 11% (n=2), but by 22% when other agencies are considered. However, the other two drivers were not addressed at all. They deal more directly with the educational system, which would pose a much greater challenge in my ability to affect change. I came up against systemic issues within the special education system early in my PDSA cycle. As I attempted to register participants, I encountered a fortified brick wall within the special education system. My program stated that it

wanted to empower parents. This created a tension and a reluctance to effectively circulate the program's flyer.

In the microcosm of special education, one can understand the dynamics of the macrocosm of our educational system and our societal structures. Earlier in my EdD program we read *On Being Included* by Sarah Ahmed (2012). Her research discusses diversity work within higher education institutions of learning. However, her work is relevant to inclusion work in education. In fact, if one was to exchange inclusion for diversity or race, the premise fits. For example, Ahmed (2012. p.4) writes: "Saying that race (inclusion) is "too difficult" is how racism (exclusion) gets reproduced...The belief that racism (exclusion) is inevitable is how racism(exclusion) become inevitable." Another example is when Ahmed (2012, p. 8) refers to her 2009 work by stating: "if we start with complicity, we recognize our proximity to the problems we are addressing." These statements represent common themes as my work dove deeper into the special education system.

As I began implementing PEG, I was disappointed by the lack of registrants I was accruing and the lack of diversity within the registered participants. Recruiting a mixed demographic of participants was a known challenge and one that was discussed with me by the administration of LVCIL Their office building is situated in the city of Allentown, but they have struggled for years on gaining access to the community. This issue expands beyond our local community as well. According to a study conducted by Burke & Goldman (2018) there is no empirical research about special education advocates who come from CLD backgrounds. This study found that there exist systemic barriers that create hurdles preventing CLD from engaging or advocating within the education system. Rossetti & Burke (2018) identified these barriers as underfunded and hostile school systems that do not understand the extend of the societal barriers CLD face daily, such as poverty or healing from trauma. Furthermore, previous research has viewed CLD families within

a deficit-based framework skewing their findings and negatively affecting policy. On the upside, special education advocacy work has been growing for the last ten years, and there has been an increase in specific training on how best to work with and advocate for CLD families (Rossetti & Burke, 2018). However, it fell short in its attempt to empower families to advocate for themselves or community. This phenomenon was also apparent within my study. I was amazed at the difficulty I had when trying to gain access to administrators or teachers within all the school districts, and there was extraordinarily little diversity among the participants. In fact, 92% (n=22) of the participants were from an upper to middle class, white background.

During the planning phase of the PDSA cycle, I came across many physical barriers which prevented me from speaking directly to families. Many of the responses I received from teachers and administrators were a form of institutional talk. These statements such as, "how we do things here," or "how" our program works are performative and create barriers when addressing diversity or inclusion (Ahmed, 2012). During a conversation with the LVCIL administration, we discussed how specific districts earmarked for the study have stated to him in the past that they "don't want our parents to know about these [LVCIL] services. We [the administrator] want them to rely on our services." This was an alarming statement when I first heard it, but it is quintessential of the brick wall, and its exclusionary practices. To truly empower parents so they can gain the optimum program for their children it will be a continual struggle for inclusion to become an institutional thought (Ahmed, 2012).

Ahmed (2012, p. 26) explains this continued struggle as "banging your head against a brick wall." Each school system expresses an interest in inclusion but that does not mean the same institution is open to it. For Ahmed (2012) the wall is a physical form of what is referred to as the "institutional inertia" or the lack of institutional will to change. As I described earlier, the PEG

program was not able to break into the Allentown or Bethlehem School Districts. In the third session with Representative Schlossberg, the only participant from the Allentown School District expressed concern for her son's education and lack of a successful transition plan. She stated that her family was at a loss for their next step. Her son had gone through a community college program that was not successful for him, and she had not been able to get access to consistent VR services. There were several agencies in attendance for this event. Many reached out and their contact information was provided. However, we never heard from this family again. It made me question what the issues were in the system that such barriers continue to exist and continue to shut out families from gaining access to the wealth and depth of programs in the area.

My goal for the PEG program was to build an alliance among the caregivers so a sense of community would form and a willingness to work towards change and the sharing of resources. The snags I experienced when attempting to register participants thwarted my goal to utilize a service-learning framework throughout the PEG curriculum. A solid and consistent group of participants did not form until the third session. Additionally, the caregivers preferred to meet through Zoom which created an intimacy barrier. Virtual meetings are helpful with busy schedules, but the connection of physical community is lost. I additionally realized that the participants would occasionally share information or personal stories of how they handled specific situations, but there was a greater sense of individual responsibility than there was of community togetherness. I am not certain if this is a cultural preference based on the idea of rugged individualism and a sense of meritocracy. I refer to the term meritocracy in the sense of the personal triumphs experienced when considering the services and programs the caregivers were able to secure for their child. There was also a vivid sense of panic and confusion surrounding the stress of taking care of young adults, who would continue to require much parental care. This type of stress has been a constant

in the caregivers' lives, and it must be overwhelming. Lastly, there was a geographical separation among the parents from the Bucks County CIL. I have laid inroads on future collaboration, but I am not certain if it will take place.

7.1.1 Next Steps & Implications

Overall, the PEG program was successful for the participants in that they were able to acquire the knowledge to increase services to improve their child's transition plan. However, the number and the demographic make-up of the participants was not as successful as initially planned. The PEG program fell short in attaining a diversified participant pool. This would be crucial to expand equitable special education services throughout the Lehigh Valley. It is particularly important to identify strategies that will educate and empower CLD families. To begin this work, it is important to identify barriers preventing caregivers from participating in community organizations. One of the biggest shifts in policy and implementation in these programs would be the need to allow the CLD families to define the role in which they will participate in the reform that will affect their community and child (Rossetti & Burke, 2018). To create such a space for CLD the agency role needs to be transformed into a facilitator and sometimes mentor rather than an expert. The best example of how to create such an environment would be garnered through the work of Miles Horton and Paulo Freire. In their book, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversation on Education and Social Change*, they discuss how they were able to engage adults and cultivate their interactions into advocacy training. Freire explained that he started with the basic premise of, what is the level of knowledge of the people I am trying to help and more importantly, how did they come to know this (Horton & Freire, 1990, p 65)?

Caregivers within CLD communities have experienced years of negative interactions within the school system which has resulted in passive participation or a complete refusal to

participate (Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2020). Distrust has been formed due to parent involvement initiatives often attempt to shape the behavior of the parents to fit mainstream middle-class values and practices in ways that erase their culture and sense of belonging, which exasperates the marginalization within the school system (Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2020). To effectively build an inclusive parent empowerment group these practices must be eliminated, and cultural inclusivity must replace it.

The first step in opening lines of communication is active listening. It is important to respect the knowledge caregivers have of their child and their community. We must learn to honor their knowledge, their beliefs, their fears, their hopes, their expectations, and their language. We must respect that this relationship will take time and effort (Horton & Freire, 1990). To tackle this problem, it will require out of the box thinking and collaboration. As a teacher within a wealthy suburban district with a growing diverse demographics, my position as a gatekeeper is important. However, my power in effecting change lies outside of my immediate range of influence in the classroom. Therefore, I will continue to seek access through outside agencies, such as LVCIL and PEAL Education Center.

I am hoping to continue the PEG program in the upcoming school year. Over the summer I am attending a PEAL event, Empowering Change Parent Group. I hope to build alliances with both agencies to help create a respected and safe space for CLD families. Through my experiences with PEG, I will need to circumvent the school district and traditional routes of contacting caregivers. Throughout the summer and through PEAL and LVCIL contacts, I will seek community organizers who can help to identify parent groups that already exist but might work outside the system within the Allentown City School District. The next step needs to be focused on building relationships and listening to concerns and desires. If these relationships are cultivated

well, the caregivers may want to join in the established PEG program or create their own group until they feel solid in their own advocacy and reputation. The overall hope and goal would be to create a large coalition of caregivers and allies from varied backgrounds, but this would need to be a slow and steady process.

Simultaneously, the form of communication parents receive about rights and procedures needs to be addressed immediately. For decades, it has been well documented and studied that the readability of important special education documents exceeds the common caregivers' ability to comprehend. This issue has been recognized within all government documents since 1990 when President Clinton stated that all government documents need to be written in plain English using common terminology whenever possible (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006). Fitzerald & Watkins (2006) go on to discuss that plain English has been determined to be on an 8th to 9th grade reading level, but this is still too high for approximately 50% of adults seeking medical or other professional services. In a later study conducted by Mandic et al., (2012) found that the procedural safeguards were still written in an excessively high reading level. Using conservative reading formulas, their study found that over half of the nation's procedural safeguards were written on a college reading level, and almost 40% scored in the graduate and professional range. This was further backed by another study conducted by Gray et al. (2019) found that no special education document was written below an 11th- grade reading level.

This phenomenon is persistent and shown when attempting to access the CAP website, specifically the advocacy tab. As shown in *Appendix A.7*, the reading level is consistent with the findings shown in the studies. This issue was raised by a few of the participants in PEG. Participant 29 stated that he found the entire process to be confusing and difficult to follow. He is well educated and works within a highly professional field. He stated that he often thought he was "on

top" of his daughter's program but quickly learned that was not the case. When he consulted the PEAL Center, they gave him the Planning for the Future Checklist (See Appendix A.6) developed by the State in collaboration with 21andable.org and PEAL. This format was easier to understand but did not contain a visual flow. Participant 29 suggested that the information be organized in a visual format utilizing a flow chart. It would be an ideal undertaking for a diversified parent empowerment group to recreate vital information in a visually pleasing format and on a reading level that would be easily comprehended.

Having information about rights, procedures, and services accessible is a cornerstone of advocacy for caregivers. If the very organization, CAP, is not accessible or exemplary in communicating and understanding CLD families their main goal of safeguarding families from exclusionary practices concerning services and funding is merely performative. When one looks at the abysmal rate of VR services on a state and local level, CAP's directive needs to be one of justice and equity rather than performative. A final concern discovered from the PEG program was the elusive nature of VR services. They have tremendous influence and power when it comes to participants' access to programs and money for services for their children. Yet they are seldom held to a high standard of practice. If the organization charged with safeguarding this service is unattainable, who is the watchdog for VR and other Federal/State-run organizations?

7.1.2 It Doesn't Add Up

I contacted the Lehigh County Office of Intellectual Disabilities in the Spring of 2021. After discussing my research and interest in transition planning, they sent me an Excel data sheet containing information on clients in the Lehigh Valley who were eligible for VR services. Some of the data pulled from the Excel sheet is represented in Appendix A. 5.

Information is important when discussing the empowerment of caregivers, and their ability to receive needed support and services. The first table explains the number of potential OVR clients in the Lehigh Valley (n=1494). Disproportionately, the number of potential clients is extremely high while actual clients is less than 10% with another percentage of clients earmarked as unclear as to whether they are receiving or not receiving services *(See Appendix A.5).* My inclination is that the numbers had been inverted, but this is not the case. Since VR serves as an influential gatekeeper to local programs and access to funding, serving less than 20% of their potential clients should not be condoned. Yet it is.

Upon further look at the same client pool, their employment and/or volunteering experiences indicate they are grossly underserved as well *(See Appendix A.5).* It shows a strong correlation between having active VR services and having employment. One could argue that the numbers from 2020 could be skewed due to COVID-19 and the shut-down. However, for this year, VR has indicated on their website that they have 13 job referrals for unique high school students in Lehigh County. There have been improvements but at a slow rate when compared to the overall numbers of individuals with disabilities that are getting services.

8.0 Reflections

8.1 What Did I Learn From Improvement?

I have always understood that education, especially public education, is political. Through the PEG program, I stepped outside of my typical position of influence, a classroom educator, into one as an outside agency advocate. I learned of the great divide between these two roles and the need for more collaboration. Learning more about the outside agencies and their services that are offered to SSLN has helped me to better inform my students and their caregivers about services and programs that can be tailored to their specific needs. There is an opportunity to bolster the knowledge of teachers by developing yearly training on current programs and other materials to help keep teachers abreast of local agencies and the services provided. At the very least, a better dissemination of the Planning for the Future Checklist (*See Appendix A.6)* would help families. This checklist serves as a guide for parents as to what to expect for his/her child and what the school district is supposed to offer for transition services.

One of the last aspects of learning through this improvement process is based on knowing what is possible and where to find the supports to make it happen. I have had my eye on the SWiFT Education Center for a number of years. It has changed and expanded its sphere of influence over the last few years to incorporate and focus on educational practices that create a more just and equitable system. This organization was the last event for PEG, and the event focused on Rightful Presence. Rightful Presence frames the discourse on equity in teaching and learning as a call for inclusion by grounding its basic tenant in the static rights for high-quality learning opportunities for all students (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020). By grounding our educational practices in the belief of rightful presence, it eliminates exclusionary practices and helps to combat ablistic thinking. There have been yearly battles of explaining to teachers that they do not have a choice

about specific accommodations or special designed instruction. These are a part of a legal document. During the SWiFT event this very battle was discussed. The participant who was present was a parent within the Parkland School District specifically Parkland High School, which is where I currently teach. She stated that she has been struggling to get her 9th grade son, who has Down Syndrome, enrolled in the arts classes at the high school. The participant asked the SWiFT presenter if they would be able to assist her in providing training on how to implement inclusionary practices, especially in the art curriculum. She followed up with me and asked directly if I would be willing to assist her in helping her son gain access to the basic arts electives. This very idea was a motivating factor that prompted me to study transition planning as I began my EdD program. I have witnessed too many students within the Life Skills curriculum be excluded from general education curriculum, which would provide them with a wonderful opportunity to explore their interests and build on their transition plan. I wholeheartedly agreed to help her.

SWiFT is able to provide up to two hours of training for free to school systems which would like to increase the rightful presence of their most needy students in the general education environment. This will be an excellent opportunity and one that would open dialogue with the Parkland special education administration team. I look forward to collaborating with SWiFT and Parkland caregivers so we can explain to the district the benefit of partnering with SWiFT. This will be an upward battle, but it is one that may prove to be rewarding for all who become involved with it. This project will lend itself to Improvement Science, by focus on how to implement more inclusionary practices in the art room it will expose how and where the system supports exclusionary practices. Through these efforts, we can collect data to support the decision on how best to continue forward with inclusionary practices.

As I reflect on barriers that I have come across in my tenure as a special education teacher, the biggest obstacle has been the fear of the unknown, the fear of different. Through running a successful PDSA cycle exploring the special education system, the information gained will create a safe environment to explore and grow within an inclusionary model that will benefit not only the SSLN, but students without a SLN and all teachers. From success we all can grow and prosper in a more inclusive community.

Appendix A.1 PEG Flyers

Please Join

THE PARENT EMPOWERMENT GROUP

LVCiL
Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living

Hosted by LVCIL

About the group

This group is for Caregivers with children 14-21years old, who have an IEP and have questions about transition planning.

When will we meet?

We will meet monthly on the first and third Wednesday nights from January through June

- The first Wednesday of each month will be in person at LVCIL from 6p-8p
    - **713 N 13th St. Allentown PA 18102**
- The third Wednesday of each month will be on Zoom 6p-7p

What will you learn?

During these forums we will learn from other parents, experts in the field and government representatives

- About federal and State policies and the monies attached to them
- What makes up a solid Transition Program
- Secure OVR, PA Careerlink services and the programs/ services attached to them
- Advocate for your child's wants and needs
- How to build a community of support
- Build Alliances with agencies, government officials, and universities
- Gain Access to a private online Facebook Page

Contact Information

For more information and to register, please contact Kari Reardon
Cell: 610-533-5092
Email: Karireardon42@gmail.com
To Register Online:

Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living
A member of the PA Council on Independent Living, a consumer-controlled state association of Centers for Independent Living

Figure 8 Initial PEG Flyer (Front)

Please Join

THE PARENT EMPOWERMENT GROUP

LVCiL
Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living

Hosted by LVCIL

Empowering Parents Curriculum		
DATE: MONTH, DAY, LOCATION	**TOPICS**	**GUEST SPEAKER/SOURCE**
January 18th @ LVCIL 6-8 pm	Introduction to Transition Plans and their importancePrograms focus- Increase in OVR or other agency attendance at IEP meetings	Basic Concepts in OverviewGet signatures for accepting participation in StudyCelebration
Feb 1st @ LVCIL 6-8 pm	Legislation Explained Monies and Area programs	Rep from State on LegislationCIL and other agency Representations(OVR sign-up)
Feb 15 on Zoom 6-7	The What's, The Why's, and the How's of advocating (part 1)	PEAL: What is it?Discussion Panel/Questions
March 1 @ LVCIL 6-8 pmNational Inclusion Day	Transition Plan: Matching Needs with ProgramsPeople Centered Planning:Getting the Right Kind of Inclusion for your Child	Professors/ OtherPast participants in Process
March 15 Zoom 6-7	The What's, The Why's, and the How's of advocating(part 2)	Partners in Policymaking: History: What's still missing?Discussion Panel/Questions
April 12th @ LVCIL 6-8	The IEP MeetingChecklist- Knowing what to look and ask for Pre-during -& Post IEP meeting	Literature: Brainstorming and Planning session Transition DiscoveriesPEAL
April 26th Zoom 6-7	The What's, The Why's, and the How's of advocating(part 3)	Knowing your Communication Style and how best to maximize your strengthens Discussion Panel/Questions
May 10th @ LVCIL 6-8 pm	Post-Secondary Education v. Pre-Employment TrainingWhat direction to go? Does it have to be one or the other	LCCC SEED: Pre-Employment Options
May 24th Zoom 6-7	The What's, The Why's, and the How's of advocating(part 4)	Looking at the Greater Community: Sharing InformationDiscussion Panel/Questions
June 7th @LVCIL 6-8	Wrapping it all up CelebrationWhere do we go from here?Thoughts	Looking at the Greater Community: Sharing InformationDiscussion Panel/Questions

Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living
A member of the PA Council on Independent Living, a consumer-controlled state association of Centers for Independent Living

Figure 9 Initial PEG Flyer-Curriculum (Back)

Please Join

THE PARENT EMPOWERMENT GROUP

LVCiL
Lehigh Valley Center for
Independent Living

Hosted by LVCIL

About the group

This group is for Caregivers with children 14-21years old, who have an IEP and have questions about transition planning.

When is our first meeting?

Wednesday January 18th 6pm-8 pm at the LVCIL

713 N 13th St. Allentown PA 18102
You can also attend virtually-register for the Zoom link.

We will have refreshments and a raffle for a Walmart gift card

What will you learn?

At our first session Jan. 18th

- Parents will share how they secured training and services for their young adults ranging from individualize pre-employment training to on campus housing at a local university
- An OVR representative will share about their various services and the best way to obtain them.

On Feb 1st.
Representative Michael Schlossberg will discuss local initiatives that enhance transition training.

Contact Information

For more information
and to register,
please contact Kari Reardon
Cell: 610-533-5092
Email: Karireardon42@gmail.com
To Register Online:

Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living
A member of the PA Council on Independent Living, a consumer-controlled state association of Centers for Independent Living

Figure 10 Abbreviated Initial flyer

78

Figure 11 An Evening with Representative Schlossberg Flyer

Figure 12 Institute on Disabilities C2P2

Figure 13 PEAL Center

Figure 14 LCCC & LCTI Post-Secondary Education

Figure 15 PaTTAN

Figure 16 Transition Discoveries

Figure 17 SWiFT Education Center

Appendix A.2 Participants List

Table 9 Participants & Events

*Participants	Jan. 18th OVR	Feb 1st PCP	Feb 15th Rep. Schlossberg	March 1st: C2P2	March 15th PEAL Center	April 12th: LCCC & LCTI	April 26th: PaTTAN	May 10th: Transition Discoveries	May 24th: SWiFT Education Center	Total Events
Participant 1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Participant 2			1							1
Participant 3			1		1				1	3
Participant 4			1					1		3
Participant 5			1		1		1		1	4
Participant 6				1	1					2
Participant 7										0
Participant 8			1		1		1	1	1	5
Participant 9					1				1	2
Participant 10			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Participant 11								1	1	2
Participant 12			1							1
Participant 13										0
Participant 14				1		1		1		3
Participant 15			1	1	1	1	1		1	6
Participant 16			1		1			1		3
Participant 17			1							1
Participant 18			1					1		2
Participant 19							1		1	2
Participant 20			1							1
Participant 21					1			1	1	3
Participant 22					1					1
Participant 23			1		1				1	3
Participant 24			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Participant 25			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Participant 26	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
Participant 27										0
Participant 28						1	1		1	2
Participant 29							1	1	1	3
Participant 30			1							1
Grand Total	1	1	18	8	15	9	11	12	16	
Attended	1	1	15	7	8	4	0	8	2	

*Participants are listed in alphabetical order according to their email address not by the order of how they register

Table 10 Appendix A.2.2 Disaggregated Participant Information

*Participants	Parent	School District	Agency Representative	Agency
Participant 1	1	Class D		
Participant 2			1	Family Solutions
Participant 3			1	KHS
Participant 4			1	BCCIL
Participant 5	1	Class C		
Participant 6	1	Class D		
Participant 7	1	Class C		
Participant 8			1	ARC Northampton
Participant 9	1	Class D		
Participant 10			1	LVCIL
Participant 11			1	PEAC
Participant 12	1	Class A		
Participant 13	1	Class D		
Participant 14	1	Unknown		
Participant 15	1	Class C		
Participant 16	1	Class B		
Participant 17			1	CIU 21
Participant 18	1	Unknown		
Participant 19	1	Class D		
Participant 20			1	ARC Northampton
Participant 21	1	Class C		
Participant 22			1	LVCIL
Participant 23			1	ARC Northampton
Participant 24	1	Class C		
Participant 25	1	Class B		
Participant 26	1	Class D		
Participant 27			1	C2P2 TU
Participant 28	1	Class D		
Participant 29	1	Class D		
Participant 30			1	Unknown
Totals	18		12	

*Participants are listed in alphabetical order according to their email address not by the order of how they register

Appendix A.3 Surveys

Google Form Surveys

1. The Parent Empowerment Group Pre-survey

2. Representative Schlossberg Event

      a. Pre-Survey Questions

      b. Poll 1

      c. Poll 2

      d. Poll 3

      e. Poll 4

      b. Post-survey Questions

3. Elements of the Transition Plan

4. The Abundance of Services

5. The PEG RSVP Form

(The form was altered each week removing the event from the previous session)

Appendix A.4 Survey Model

Department of Special Education

The Hurst-Euless-Bedford Department of Special Education wants to learn about your understanding and satisfaction with special education services. Your answers will help us provide better support for you and your student.

1. *How many of your children currently receive special education services?* _____(Number of children)

2. *How many years have your child/children received special education services?* _____(Number of years per child)

3. *Campus where my child receives special education services:* _____
   (please list all if more than one child)

4. *Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the following. Circle the best response.*

Are you satisfied with:	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
the special education program in your child's school?	VS	S	U	VU
the special education support services your child receives?	VS	S	U	VU
the regular classroom instruction your child receives?	VS	S	U	VU
your degree of participation in the decisions regarding your child's special education services and placement?	VS	S	U	VU

5. *Please indicate **how well you understand** the following special education processes. Circle the best response number.*

Do you understand:	Completely Understand	Somewhat Understand	Do not Understand
why your child is eligible for special education?	1	2	3
the special education "referral for services" process?	1	2	3
why your child was referred for special education testing?			
your child's testing results?	1	2	3
how your child's test results will be used to decide his/her educational plan?	1	2	3
your role as a parent in the process of providing special education services for your child?	1	2	3
your role in developing the Individual Education Program (IEP)?	1	2	3
how decisions are made regarding your child's placement and how and where special education services are provided to your child?	1	2	3
the role of state mandated testing (TAKS, SDAAII, LDAA) for students in special education?	1	2	3
the role of the ARD (Admission, Review and Dismissal) Committee?	1	2	3
the explanations provided to you during the ARD meeting?	1	2	3
that if your child is 14 or older, transition needs and services are to be included in the ARD/IEP?	1	2	3

6. What could be done to increase your understanding of the special education process?

_____

_____

7. What is/was your best source of information regarding special education?

_____

_____

8. What is/was your least helpful source of information regarding special education?

_____

_____

9. What would be the best (most helpful) way to get information to you regarding special education?

_____

_____

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey.
Please return the completed form to the diagnostician at your child's school by Friday, May 20, 2005.

Figure 18 Hurst-Euless-Bedford Department of Sp. Ed. Survey

Parent Transition Survey

Student: _____   Date: _____

This survey addresses those areas identified by federal law for transition planning. Please complete the following checklist for your child/student by checking the boxes as indicated. Please add any comments or concerns that you feel will assist the IEP team in making decisions for the Individual Education Program (IEP).

Area 1: Post Secondary Education

My son/daughter intends to go on to post secondary education or training as indicated:
____ 4-year College   ____ Community College
____ Vocational/Technical School   ____ Other
____ My son/daughter does not intend to go on to post secondary education

I would like the IEP team to support my child in the following ways:
____ Assistance in making appointments with a school counselor for post secondary school
        information.
____ Assistance in applying for scholarships
____ Assistance in making application for financial aid
____ Assistance in arranging for modifications for the ACT or SAT
____ Other: _____

Comments:_____
_____

Area 2: Vocational Training

My son/daughter has successfully completed course work in the following vocational areas:
____ Family and Consumer Sciences   ____ Computers   ____ Construction Trades
____ Business   ____ Health Studies   ____ Industrial Arts
____ Photography   ____ Graphic Arts   ____ Auto
____ Other: _____
My son/daughter requires the following assistance in vocational skill training:
____ Vocational assessment information to identify areas of interest
____ Classroom support or accommodations for academic demands of vocational classes
____ Referral to an adult agency for post secondary vocational training options
____ Other: _____

Comments:
_____
_____

Figure 19 Parent Transition Survey

Appendix A.5   2020 Lehigh County of OVR Services

Table 11 2020 Lehigh County of OVR Services

Clients' OVR statues	2020 Lehigh Valley Client Index Number	Percentage of Overall VR services
No OVR Services	1246	83%
Have OVR Service	119	8%
Undetermined	129	9%
Grand Total	**1494**	

Employment/Volunteer	Count of Master Client Index Number	Percentage of Indicator
No	1075	72%
Yes	270	18%
Not Indicated	149	10%
Grand Total	**1494**	

(Lehigh County Office of Intellectual Disabilities, 2020)

Appendix A.6 PDE Transition Checklist

Planning for the Future Checklist

Use this checklist as a discussion guide in preparing for life after high school. Bring it to your meetings with your school and/or agency supporters to talk about your progress and how best to plan for your future. The checklist is meant to be individualized and not all of the items listed may pertain to you.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Every Year
1. Meet with your agency and school supporters.
2. Take time to talk about information learned from any assessments about your abilities and interests.
3. Ask about accommodations and technology you can use to meet your school, work, and other life goals.
4. Use your individualized education program (IEP) to create the right goals to help you get ready for life after high school (transition).
5. Build on what you started the year before.

14-15 Year Olds

Education/Training After High School
- ☐ Talk with your school and/or agency supporters about your interests and what you want to study after high school.
- ☐ Study websites to learn about training, technical school, college programs and classes where you can explore an interest or hobby. Visit at least one of these educational programs.
- ☐ Meet with your school's transition coordinator to make sure you are taking the right classes for your goals.
- ☐ Understand your disability. Ask for your own accommodations and/or assistive technology.

Employment
- ☐ Sign up to volunteer and job shadow during school and/or summer months.
- ☐ Start keeping a list of the names, email addresses, and phone numbers of people who can be references for jobs.
- ☐ Learn about programs at your local career and technical education (CTE) centers. If you are interested, ask to visit. If you like it, learn how to apply.

Community Living
- ☐ Join an activity at your school, community, or place of worship.
- ☐ Practice asking for what you need during your IEP and other meetings.
- ☐ Ask about certified transportation training at your IEP meeting.
- ☐ Know the medications you take (names, dosage, why you're taking them). Talk with your doctor about sexuality and boundaries, and about how behaviors like smoking and drinking affect our bodies.
- ☐ If you have an intellectual disability and no one has contacted the County's Office of Intellectual Disabilities (OID), ask your parents/guardians to call the county to complete an intake to register for services.
- ☐ If needed, create an Individual Health Plan with your doctor and school nurse.

15-16 Year Olds

Education/Training After High School
- ☐ Learn how accommodations may be different at the educational program you've chosen for after high school, so you can start to prepare.
- ☐ If you've chosen college, sign-up for the PSAT test (given in fall of sophomore and junior years) and make an appointment with your guidance counselor to talk about colleges and your plan for applying.
- ☐ Visit technical schools or certificate programs you may be interested in.

Employment
- ☐ To get ready for a job, practice filling out job applications and answering questions an employer might ask you.
- ☐ Ask your school and/or agency supporters for help with on-the-job training, job exploration, and/or part-time employment in your areas of interest. Your school can help you get this experience during school and during the summer.
- ☐ Ask your parents/guardians to sign forms that will allow Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and/or other adult agencies to come to your transition meetings.

Community Living
- ☐ Talk with your school and/or agency supporters about the possibility of funding through Medicaid Waivers.
- ☐ Keep a list of your medical conditions and physicians. Be able to describe your health needs.
- ☐ If you have questions about your emotional or mental health, talk to your parents/guardians, school or agency supporters, and your medical team. You can also call the county crisis line for help.
- ☐ Find out about adult agencies (like OVR) that can help you prepare for work, training, and independent living. The back of this checklist has a list of these agencies.
- ☐ Keep copies of your medical, education, and government papers in a file to have ready when you need them.
- ☐ Learn the differences between wants and needs, and the differences between earned and unearned income.

Figure 20 Planning for the Future Checklist (Front)

Planning for the Future Checklist

Use this checklist as a discussion guide in preparing for life after high school. Bring it to your meetings with your school and/or agency supporters to talk about your progress and how best to plan for your future. The checklist is meant to be individualized and not all of the items listed may pertain to you.

Name: _____   Date: _____

Every Year
1. Meet with your agency and school supporters.
2. Take time to talk about information learned from any assessments about your abilities and interests.
3. Ask about accommodations and technology you can use to meet your school, work, and other life goals.
4. Use your individualized education program (IEP) to create the right goals to help you get ready for life after high school (transition).
5. Build on what you started the year before.

14-15 Year Olds	15-16 Year Olds
Education/Training After High School	
☐ Talk with your school and/or agency supporters about your interests and what you want to study after high school. ☐ Study websites to learn about training, technical school, college programs and classes where you can explore an interest or hobby. Visit at least one of these educational programs. ☐ Meet with your school's transition coordinator to make sure you are taking the right classes for your goals. ☐ Understand your disability. Ask for your own accommodations and/or assistive technology.	☐ Learn how accommodations may be different at the educational program you've chosen for after high school, so you can start to prepare. ☐ If you've chosen college, sign-up for the PSAT test (given in fall of sophomore and junior years) and make an appointment with your guidance counselor to talk about colleges and your plan for applying. ☐ Visit technical schools or certificate programs you may be interested in.
Employment	
☐ Sign up to volunteer and job shadow during school and/or summer months. ☐ Start keeping a list of the names, email addresses, and phone numbers of people who can be references for jobs. ☐ Learn about programs at your local career and technical education (CTE) centers. If you are interested, ask to visit. If you like it, learn how to apply.	☐ To get ready for a job, practice filling out job applications and answering questions an employer might ask you. ☐ Ask your school and/or agency supporters for help with on-the-job training, job exploration, and/or part-time employment in your areas of interest. Your school can help you get this experience during school and during the summer. ☐ Ask your parents/guardians to sign forms that will allow Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and/or other adult agencies to come to your transition meetings.
Community Living	
☐ Join an activity at your school, community, or place of worship. ☐ Practice asking for what you need during your IEP and other meetings. ☐ Ask about certified transportation training at your IEP meeting. ☐ Know the medications you take (names, dosage, why you're taking them). Talk with your doctor about sexuality and boundaries, and about how behaviors like smoking and drinking affect our bodies. ☐ If you have an intellectual disability and no one has contacted the County's Office of Intellectual Disabilities (OID), ask your parents/guardians to call the county to complete an intake to register for services. ☐ If needed, create an Individual Health Plan with your doctor and school nurse.	☐ Talk with your school and/or agency supporters about the possibility of funding through Medicaid Waivers. ☐ Keep a list of your medical conditions and physicians. Be able to describe your health needs. ☐ If you have questions about your emotional or mental health, talk to your parents/guardians, school or agency supporters, and your medical team. You can also call the county crisis line for help. ☐ Find out about adult agencies (like OVR) that can help you prepare for work, training, and independent living. The back of this checklist has a list of these agencies. ☐ Keep copies of your medical, education, and government papers in a file to have ready when you need them. ☐ Learn the differences between wants and needs, and the differences between earned and unearned income.

Figure 21 Planning for the Future Checklist (Back)

Appendix A.7 CAP Readability of Website

Appendix A.7.1 CAP Advocacy Webpage and Readability Analyzer tool

CAP Advocacy webpage: https://equalemployment.org/cap-advocacy/

Readability Analyzer tool: https://datayze.com/readability-analyzer

Appendix A.7.2 Statistical Results

Table 12 Passage Statistics

Number of Sentences:	107
Words Per Sentence:	20.53
Characters Per Word:	5.21
Percentage of Difficult Words (Estimated).	22.98%

Table 13 Appendix A.7.3 Various Readability Scores of CAP Advocacy Page

Flesch Reading Ease: 31.31
The Flesch score uses the number of syllables and sentence lengths to determine the reading ease of the sample.
A Flesch score of 60 is taken to be plain English. A score in the range of 60-70 corresponds to 8th/9th grade English level. A score between 50 and 60 corresponds to a 10th/12th grade level. Below 30 is college graduate level. To give you a feel for what the different levels are like, most states require scores from 40 to 50 for insurance documents
Gunning Fog Scale Level: 17.37
The Gunning Fog scale is similar to the Flesch scale in that it uses syllable counts and sentence length. The scale uses the percentage of 'Foggy' words, those that contain 3 or more syllables.
A fog score of 5 is readable, 10 is hard, 15 is difficult, and 20 is very difficult.
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 13.99
The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level heuristic indicates that the text can be read by the average student in the specified grade level.
SMOG Grade: 15.52
SMOG score requires passage to be at least 30 sentences long
The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level heuristic indicates that the text can be read by the average student in the specified grade level.
Dale-Chall Score: 10.35
Dale-Chall is one of the most accurate readability metrics. Rather than rely on syllable counts to identify difficult words, Dale-Chall incorporates a list of 3,000 easy words which were understood by 80% of fourth-grade students. The readability score is then computed based on how many words present in the passage are not in the list of easy words.
A score of 4.9 or lower indicates the passage is easily readable by the average 4th grade. Scores between 9.0 and 9.9 indicate the passage is at a college level of readability.
Fry Readability Grade Level: 15
Fry Grade Level requires passage to be at least 100 words long
Fry Readability graph was developed by Edward Fry and is often selected for its simplicity and accuracy. The graph has two axes: the average number of syllables (x-axis) and the average number of sentences (y-axis) per hundred words. Passages of text that are at least one hundred words can be plotted on the graph to find the corresponding grade level.

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