

# Strengths-Based Transition Planning: A Positive Approach for Students With Learning Disabilities

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## Abstract

Students with learning disabilities (LD) benefit from individualized transition services that address their strengths and assets. This article provides three steps to facilitate strengths-based transition planning: (a) independent and guided reflection, (b) assessment, and (c) alignment of strengths to each component of the transition plan. Sample materials provide guidance on identifying a wide range of strengths, (i.e., attributes, relationships, contexts, skills) and writing positive disability impact statements, present levels, goals, and services.

## Keywords

transition planning, learning disabilities, strengths-based, student involvement

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reauthorization in 2004 added strengths to its list of considerations for the transition component of the Individualized Education Program (IEP). By focusing on strengths rather than deficits, transition plans can foster growth mindsets (Garwood & Ampuja, 2019) and combat stigmatization and low expectations for students with disabilities (Buntinx, 2013). In particular, a strengths-based approach to transition planning can benefit students with learning disabilities (LD) who continue to have poor postsecondary education and employment outcomes (Newman et al., 2010) and who often perceive transition planning as negative and inauthentic (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

To address strengths in transition, students must gain critical self-awareness skills. Research supports the use of numerous evidence-based strategies to address self-awareness and increase student involvement in transition planning, including the *self-directed IEP*, *self-advocacy strategy*, and *self-determined learning model of instruction* (Rowe et al., 2020). These interventions help students reflect and gain confidence in expressing themselves. However, other IEP team members (e.g., special education teachers, general education teachers, parents, administrators) must also gain the necessary mindsets to support students in identifying their strengths. In describing effective culturally responsive transition planning, Achola (2019) argued that IEP team

members must consider not only a student's individual strengths but also their assets, which can include family, community, and culture. By building a strong relationship with the student and valuing both strengths and assets, IEP team members can better design affirming and authentic services.

Still, there are few practical guidelines to support strengths-based transition planning for students with LD (Trainor et al., 2020). This article offers a series of three research-informed steps—(a) independent and guided reflection on initial strengths, (b) assessment of additional strengths, and (c) alignment of strengths to each transition plan component—to promote self-awareness, student involvement, and positive mindsets. The following sections describe these steps in detail and provide sample activities, strengths assessments, and excerpts from a transition plan document.

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## Step 1: Independent and Guided Reflection on Initial Strengths

To begin the process, students must reflect on their strengths to build self-awareness through both independent and guided activities. For independent reflection, students can generate bullet point lists and write detailed journal entries describing their strengths. Given that students need ample time to brainstorm and complete these activities in school or at home, the following prompts should allocate at least two weeks for initial self-reflection:

- All people have strengths and weaknesses. What are your strengths? Brainstorm a list of as many as possible.
- From your list, identify your top five strengths. Write a separate journal entry explaining why you selected each one.

Depending on preferences, students can reflect by writing in a transition notebook or dictating responses with an audio recording device, saving files in a transition folder online. The key is for students to begin thinking positively about themselves. However, many may not feel comfortable sharing strengths, and some might not believe they possess any, resulting in blank lists, short journal entries, and overall frustration in the activity. In these cases, IEP team members should provide encouragement as early as possible, helping students initiate or expand their reflections by offering suggestions or personal examples.

After initiating reflection through independent activities, guided reflection can direct student-thinking toward a more diverse range of strengths. Provided in Figure 1, the ARCS acronym categorizes strengths as Attributes, Relationships, Contexts, and Skills. These areas capture the individual and collective strengths necessary for success in postsecondary, employment, and community settings (Achola, 2019; Trainor, 2017). Considering the following student-friendly definitions, examples, and prompts, students can engage in conversations about strengths with IEP team members or classmates. Then, over the course of another week, they can continue reflection by generating an additional bullet-point list and journal entry for each category.

- *Attributes*: These are your inner strengths. They are your best qualities, your unique personality, and your most positive character traits. This is both what you truly believe about yourself and what others see in you (e.g., adventurous, caring, funny, loyal, responsible, thoughtful). What are your attribute strengths? Why?
- *Relationships*: These are the strengths you have from your connection to others. They are the individuals you can go to for support, and the groups you can

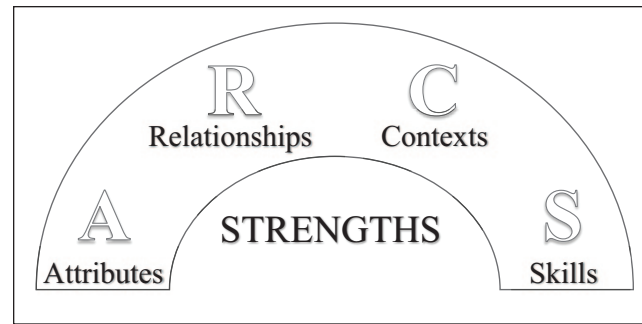


Figure 1. ARCS acronym.

draw on for friendship, identity, and access to shared resources (e.g., best friend, close teachers, family members, neighbors, online social network, teammates). What are your relationship strengths? Why?

- *Contexts*: These are the strengths you have from your access to certain places or services. They can be your immediate surroundings, places you go to in times of need, and the larger systems, cultures, or environments that shape your life (e.g., after school programs, church, cultural centers, governmental services, local businesses, nearby colleges). What are your context strengths? Why?
- *Skills*: These are your outer strengths. They are your most special talents, areas of expertise or proficiency, and greatest abilities. They are the things you are naturally good at and the things that you have worked hard at to master (e.g., art, athletics, leadership, math, mechanics, music, problem-solving, reading, socializing, technology). What are your skill strengths? Why?

Together, independent and guided reflection encourage students to consider and reconsider their transition-related strengths. The first activity allows students to provide their initial, unfiltered thoughts, and the second activity guides students to expand and organize them. Figure 2 provides a sample document demonstrating how the guided reflection enhances a student's original bullet-point list. Although student perspectives are critical, transition plans should also consider the perspectives of other stakeholders. Each IEP team member can reflect using the ARCS acronym to spark conversation and inform the design of authentic, culturally responsive, and strengths-based transition services.

## Step 2: Assessment of Additional Strengths

Next, students and IEP team members can complete various assessments to further explore and substantiate strengths. Table 1 provides a list of free, easily accessible, online

Independent Reflection	Guided Reflection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Creative</i></li> <li>• <i>Hardworking</i></li> <li>• <i>Responsible</i></li> <li>• <i>Respectful</i></li> <li>• <i>Telling stories</i></li> <li>• <i>Swimming</i></li> </ul>	<p>Attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Creative, hardworking, good listener at school, respectful</i></li> </ul> <p>Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Family always by my side, older brother, best-friend, English teacher</i></li> </ul> <p>Contexts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Access to internet and libraries, nearby restaurants and stores, strong unity in town</i></li> </ul> <p>Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Telling stories, staying organized, swimming and exercising, drawing</i></li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** Sample strengths reflection activities.

strengths assessments categorized using the ARCS acronym. These tools can supplement other more formalized measures used in transition planning for students with LD (e.g., achievement tests, curriculum-based assessments, direct observation; National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2016). By completing assessments in each ARCS category, students can further analyze their strengths and investigate areas missed in prior reflection and assessment. For example, a student might be able to identify a skill-related strength in the area of leadership using the ARCS guided-questions. However, by completing the Self-Determination Inventory (Center on Developmental Disabilities, 2019), this student will be able to isolate more targeted skills related to leadership, such as self-advocacy, decision-making, and goal setting. Each assessment is simple to administer and score following the directions listed on the document or website. Depending on personal preferences and skills, students can complete these at school or at home, independently or with guidance. Then, students can save completed assessments in either a physical or digital transition folder to refer to throughout the transition planning process.

To encourage a high level of involvement, students should also engage in scoring, analyzing, and discussing assessment results. If done at school, special education or general education teachers can align these activities to academic standards. Students can practice important math skills by calculating average scores, science skills by creating and interpreting charts or graphs, and writing skills by summarizing and synthesizing data into reports. Beyond academics, this engagement with transition assessment data can foster continued development of self-awareness. Teachers can encourage growth in this area by scaffolding activities. First, students can reflect privately. Then, they can discuss strengths in a structured setting with teachers and classmates. Finally, they can participate in and even

lead transition planning meetings, advocating for the consideration of strengths in their official transition goals and services.

### Step 3: Alignment of Strengths to Each Transition Plan Component

After in-depth reflection and ongoing assessment, students should develop a strong understanding of their strengths. From these data, IEP team members can infuse ARCS categories into each component of the official transition plan document. To guide this development, Flannery et al. (2015) offered suggestions for evaluating a plan’s alignment to requirements from IDEA (2004). The following sections expand on these general recommendations with additional suggestions for writing strengths-based (a) disability impact statements, (b) present levels of academic and functional performance (PLAAFP), and (c) aligned goals, a course of study, and coordinated services. Figure 3 provides excerpts from a strengths-based transition plan. In practice, this document should review the results of multiple assessments, provide multiple goals, and include additional description about the course of study and coordinated activities.

#### Disability Impact Statement

Transition plans must include a disability impact statement, which typically discusses the student’s disability eligibility label(s), the specific impact of the student’s disability on involvement in the general education curriculum, and the student’s individual needs (Flannery et al., 2015). To be strengths-based, statements can include two additions: (a) a student or family description of the disability and (b) the student’s strengths along with their needs. In many cases, a family’s cultural or personal beliefs about disability differ with the specific definitions and categories described in federal law (Greene, 2011). Although a specific label is required for services, a strengths-based IEP acknowledges differing perspectives. For example, a parent of a student with a specific LD might identify more with terms such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, processing disorder, or learning difference. By including unique perspectives in the disability impact statement, meetings can start off on a positive note, inviting student and family engagement.

Honest conversations with each member of IEP teams can develop strengths-based disability impact statements. Parents and students, especially, should feel comfortable expressing their comfort or discomfort with LD and related terminology. The special education teacher should provide ample information about how LD is defined per IDEA (2004), answering questions about prevalence, characteristics, and common misperceptions. Most importantly,

**Table 1.** Strengths-Based Transition Assessments and Descriptions.

Category	Assessment	Description
Attributes	T-Folio Strengths Assessment (CCTS, 2020) College and Career Competency (CCC) Framework Needs Assessment (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2016)	Identifies a student's top three personal and work-based attributes. Surveys the most important and relevant attributes for college and career success.
Relationships	Social Mapping and Planning for Community Membership (Garrett Center, 2017) Networking Formative Questionnaire (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2016)	Identifies relationships in the community that students and families utilize for recreation/leisure activities. Categorizes a student's ability to support others and develop important relationships for transition.
Contexts	Community Resource Mapping (Crane & Mooney, 2005) Community Summary Log (INSTRC, 2020)	Maps community contexts to create an action plan for accessing resources. Monitors the community contexts a student accesses over time.
Skills	Self-Determination Inventory (Center on Developmental Disabilities, 2019) The Bilingual Advantage to Transition (PSSIEP, 2019)	Assesses skills in self-determination such as action, decision, and belief. Highlights skills associated with being bilingual to include in college or employment resumes.

Note. PSSIEP = Post-School Success for English Learners with IEPs; INSTRC = Indiana Secondary Transition Resource Center; CCTS = Center for Change in Transition Services; IEPs = individualized education programs.

Strengths-Based Transition Plan			
Student: Sonya X	Grade: 10	Disability: LD	Date: 12/15/2020
Disability Impact Statement	<i>Sonya is eligible for special education services with a specific learning disability in decoding and word recognition. Sonya's parent states that she has more of a learning difference than a learning disability and prefers the term dyslexia. She has difficulty reading grade level texts with the necessary accuracy and fluency for comprehension, and this hinders her progress in the general education curriculum without accommodations such as graphic organizers and extra time. She excels at oral storytelling and creativity and has strong support from family, including an older brother in college, and her access to the library and the swim team/aquatics center.</i>		
Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance	<i>On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, at home with a parent, Sonya completed the online Self-Determination Inventory (SDI:SR), an assessment of her ability to set goals, make decisions, and understand themselves. Her strength is in the area of action (self-advocacy, achieving goals), scoring 72 out of 100. Her area of greatest need is in the area of decision (choice making, planning), scoring 29 out of 100. In between, was the area of belief (self-awareness, self-knowledge), scoring 41 out of 100. Since the previous assessment of the SDI:SR on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Sonya scored 5 points higher in each category, demonstrating significant improvement.</i>		
Alignment of Goals, Course of Study, and Transition Services to Strengths	<p><b>Key Strengths:</b></p> <p>Attribute: <i>Creativity, Hard working</i></p> <p>Relationship: <i>Older brother at local university, Member of swim team</i></p> <p>Context: <i>Lives near library</i></p> <p>Skill: <i>Oral storytelling, Action in Self-Determination, Swimming</i></p>	<p><b>Sample Component (Alignment):</b></p> <p>Goal: <i>By December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, Sonya will increase her score on the SDI:SR in the area of action to 82 out of 100 (Skill).</i></p> <p>Course of Study: <i>English II and Creative Writing Elective with emphasis on oral storytelling and supports for fluency and reading comprehension (Skill + Attribute). Independent Study for internship at library and part-time job at aquatics center to build self-determination (Context + Relationship)</i></p> <p>Transition Services: <i>Tour and observe class at brother's university (Relationship + Skill). Internship at local library (Context + Attribute). Self-advocacy instruction (Skill). Part-time job at local aquatics center (Relationship + Skill)</i></p>	

**Figure 3.** Excerpts from an example strengths-based transition plan.

conversations should center on the fact that although students with LD may have deficits in specific skills or areas of academic achievement, they are still capable of learning and possess many strengths. Members of the IEP team can

initiate informal conversations related to disability and its impact on transition to develop the trust necessary to collaborate with each other in crafting these statements at official planning meetings.



## Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance

Next, transition plans must include a summary of assessment results to include in the PLAAFP section. Typically, this is an objective report of data with a concise summary focused on the student's needs (Flannery et al., 2015). To exceed these expectations, a strengths-based PLAAFP statement (a) is student and family friendly and (b) emphasizes multiple areas of strength (i.e., ARCS). This is not to say that IEPs should avoid reporting results of assessments that demonstrate significant need or deficits; it merely suggests that documents and meetings should seek to frame data in a positive and understandable manner. For example, each statement should describe results, beginning with strengths and ending with areas for growth.

To ensure PLAAFP statements are student and family friendly, all IEP team members should be active in developing them. Students can generate initial summaries of reflections and assessments. Then, IEP team members can further discuss results and synthesize statements, considering the best way to report data on strengths. To facilitate participation, special education teachers should define key strengths-based transition terminology, such as positive character traits, community resource mapping, and self-determination. They can also provide samples of well-written statements that address each ARCS category. If PLAAFP statements are accessible and positive, students and family members can become leaders in developing the remaining sections of the transition plan.

## Goals, Course of Study, and Coordinated Activities

Transition plans must include appropriate transition and postsecondary goals, a course of study, and coordinated services. To meet expectations, goals must be measurable. Courses of study and coordinated activities must address specific skills, and each must align with the results of age-appropriate assessments (Flannery et al., 2015). For a strengths-based approach, these services can continue to address a student's preferences, interests, and needs. However, the emphasis should be on a student's diverse set of strengths rather than only their deficits. This can foster a growth mindset in students (Garwood & Ampuja, 2019) and promote high expectations and cultural awareness in other IEP team members (Achola, 2019; Trainor, 2017).

To design strengths-based transition services, IEP teams can ensure that each activity aligns with one or more ARCS category. First, by synthesizing multiple PLAAFP statements, they can identify a student's key strengths in each area. Then, they can work together to design the most relevant and affirming goals, courses, and activities. For example, goals can seek to enhance or generalize skills in which

a student already excels, courses can consider a student's relationships with classmates or teachers, and activities can draw on the contexts or attributes most likely to facilitate continued growth and mastery. Finally, with progress monitoring that includes frequent feedback from the student, IEP team members can continually revise transition plans.

## Conclusion

This article presented three research-informed steps to promote strengths-based transition planning for students with LD. The supporting materials guide IEP teams in facilitating self-awareness, assessing a wide range of strengths, and designing positive transition plan documents. Although comprehensive transition plans address additional factors (e.g., needs, interests, preferences), these steps can help promote the mindsets necessary for more culturally responsive, student-driven, and authentic services. By making strengths the focal point of transition plans, students with LD and their families can have more positive experiences, opening up the possibility for increased collaboration and improved programming.

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