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Outcomes for Special Education 18-21 Transition Programs: A Parent Perspective

Mandy Kasowicz

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Bethel University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education.

St Paul, MN

2021

Approved By

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## Abstract

Parenting is a complicated journey that never ends for those who raise children with special needs. Families need to make several difficult decisions about life after high school, and they are often left alone to navigate those choices. Decisions on life after high school are one of several choices families are left to navigate. This qualitative study captures how parents decide and what they look for when enrolling in a tuition-based transition program. Through three focus groups, parents were interviewed to determine critical outcomes that were important in program selection and how they ended up making the final choice to enroll within a specific program. Parents who enroll in transition programs look for hands-on experience in a realistic environment. Factors such as student interest, personal philosophy, and advocacy influence how parents decide to enroll in tuition-based, residential programs. The information from this study will support and inform current programs to refine the transition programs process and remove barriers to access. The goal is to allow more families access and enhance programming for students.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Matt. Your endless support, love, and encouragement have been crucial to finishing this dissertation adventure. I am blessed to do this life with you.

## Acknowledgment

So many people have helped and supported me in this dissertation process. Without them, this document would be sitting in my google drive.

Matt: Thank you for your endless support, the coffee trips, and loving me through this all.

Anika & Harper: My dear sweet babies who grew up watching their mom behind the computer on nights and weekends to get this work done. I love you both so much!

My Parents: Told me that my options were limitless, but to always remember my roots. Thank you for cheering me on and being proud of me no matter what crazy adventure I start.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **Introduction to the Study**

Students spend their K-12 school years working towards graduation and increased independence. Having a plan for post-secondary options is the topic of conversation for all students, but this takes on a new meaning for students with disabilities. As families with students who receive special education services for intellectual and functional needs prepare for life after high school, they must shift focus toward independent life skills in addition to the academic students need in a post-secondary setting (Meyers, 2011). This dual focus through high school can be a difficult balance for teams. Educators are aware that if students and families can be active participants in this process, they have a higher success rate in meeting their Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals (Test & Grossi, 2011). Having families active in the process supports the student to reach their personal goals.

Students with intellectual and functional needs can receive additional transition supports to help develop a plan for adulthood. Special Education law states that students can receive special education services through the school district until the age of 21 (IDEA, Sec 300.43), which allows for continued and focused learning on post-secondary readiness skills, employment, and functional life skills. Local school and intermediate districts in Minnesota house various programs to meet due process law (Minnesota Statute 125A.22, 2014). These programs are free options for students. Additionally, there are three tuition-based transition or life skills programs in Minnesota that have an experience specifically geared at providing services for students with intellectual and functional disabilities that allow for a student

residential experience (Griffin & Papay, 2014). These programs range from \$30,000-\$50,000 per year based on tuition listed on each program's respective website.

The researcher of this dissertation was asked to develop and teach a Transition Class in the community as a course for high school students and has developed a passion for ensuring the content in the course best prepares students for the next steps into adult life. Over the past decade of this program, the researcher of this study has talked about various post-secondary options with families in IEP meetings. Parents are looking for successful outcomes after completing these programs that match their students' unique strengths and interests (Rehfeldt, Clark, & Lee, 2012). Throughout this experience, it has become evident that parents have reasons for selecting programs for their children after high school. As they search for options to best meet their child's needs and help them become independent, parents become increasingly savvy in looking for opportunities for their students (Trach, 2012). Considering this, additional research needs to be completed regarding aligning goals parents wish for their child in the programming that transition programs provide. Researchers and educators question how parents select expensive tuition-based programs instead of the school district and government-funded day programs and group homes with so many options available. While many programs exist, there is a lack of primary research to support how families decide to attend such programs and what their end goal is for their child (Papay & Bambara, 2014). This study investigated how parents make these selections and what they value in post-secondary options.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The federal law Sec. 300.43 Transition Service portion of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that special education students that are eligible enter transition services. These services are available for students after high school and between 18-21

years old. To qualify for transition-related services, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team must document a need, and the IEP must contain at least one recorded goal in each of the following areas of transition: post-secondary, functional/independent living, and employment (IDEA, 2004). The process of identifying outcomes for students should start right away in high school, if not before, to guarantee the most successful transitional setting (Ihara, Wolf-Branigin, & White, 2012). Each school district offers varying degrees of programming to meet these needs. Past quantitative research from the National Longitudinal Study (Newman et al., 2011) has been foundational in confirming that students entering transition programs have well-documented needs in the areas of transition. In turn, transition programs are developed in response to this documentation. Specific curriculum and services are rooted in this process and serve for meeting the standards of the goals developed in the IEP meeting (Newman et al., 2011).

While the cyclical model of developing programs based on student needs makes sense on paper, there are several difficulties in how this process is applied in educational settings. Meyers (2011) stated that training teachers to carry out this work effectively is minimal in college settings, leaving a deficit in learning models that support the teaching of life skills. Additionally, educators working with the 18-21 year old population shift the focus from purely academics to life skill preparation and have limited knowledge of curriculum and expected outcomes (Sprunger, Harvey, & Quick, 2018). It is not a surprise that some Minnesota parents are opting to pay for services outside what the school district provides free of charge in this environment.

Transition programs, specifically transition programs funded through K-12 schools and offered for free to families, must be transparent in their end goal and have specific outcomes for students. Curriculum alignment, solid IEP goals, and student growth towards independence make up a significant part of successful student programming (Rehfeldt et al., 2012). IDEA (2004)

outlines the work for IEP teams to determine goals specific to student needs. With no standards to align to, program outcomes tend to be subjective and difficult to outline (Ihara et al., 2012). This lack of specificity means that each transition program can look very different in its offering to students. Bouck and Joshi (2015) shared that due to limited program outcomes and the difficulty in tracking longitudinal data around students' specific products, it is hard to measure and gauge precisely what success looks like for each student. While it is known that factors such as program outcomes influence parent selection of these programs, it is important to note that parent voice is consistently missing from the research. Parent perspectives on how they are deciding to enroll in transition programs, especially those that are not offered free of charge through the local school district, are vital components that drive program deliverables. Bringing in parent voice and aligning success measures to family goals is one critical way for transition programs to individualize programming and raise curricular expectations (Rehm, Fisher, Fuentes-Afflick, & Chesla, 2013). However, very little has been done to understand what parents are looking for in regards to goals for life after high school.

Transition programs and supportive services in Minnesota range from specific support in finding jobs to residential programs supporting all areas of transition services. Currently, there are three schools in Minnesota that have tuition-based programs parents can pay for to provide transition services. Beyond Limits Christian College, Minnesota Independence College and Community (MICC), and the BUILD program through Bethel University offer students supported programming to build independence and promote inclusion within the community for the students they serve. Program outcomes in all three schools focus on employment and independent living. The opportunity for students to live away from their parents makes Beyond



Limits, MICC, and BUILD different than traditional transition programs through the school district.

To make changes to learning objectives within all transition programming, research must be conducted to understand post-secondary outcomes for students with significant disabilities and the expectations parents have for student independence after transition programs. In understanding why parents are willing to pay for a private residential experience, lower cost and free programs can better compete to provide access for students who cannot afford the cost associated with this experience. With this knowledge, programs all over the state can better align with family goals and provide an improved experience for students starting in high school when transition planning begins.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Research suggests a gap exists between school expectations for 18-21-year-old transition programming and family expectations for post-secondary school services. While students and families express a desire to attend a post-secondary program, very few follow through (Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu & Javitz, 2016). For all transition programs to improve, there has to be further research conducted to include the parent perspective and family-related goals present within outcomes in transition programming (Rehfeldt et al., 2012). This qualitative study included feedback collected from parents about how they made post-high school transition placement decisions and what outcomes they deem important for their child. Additionally, this study sought to discover the reasons and outcomes important to parents when selecting and paying for tuition-based transition programs in the state of Minnesota. Since parents are offered a free transition program through the local school district, it was essential to understand why parents would pay for similar services. With this knowledge, programs all over the state can

better align with family goals and provide a better experience for students. Furthermore, this knowledge can support school leaders as they systematically change existing transitional programs.

### **Research Questions**

This research study focused on the following questions:

1. What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs?
  - a. What are the major priorities and themes parents focus on in relation to transition programs?
2. How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child into?
  - a. What factors are present in this decision-making process?
  - b. How might local school district resources play into this decision?
  - c. What main factors do parents cite for enrolling in private, tuition-based transition programs instead of school district programs?

### **Significance of the Study**

More students with disabilities attend post-secondary institutions than ever before in history (Herbert et al., 2014). However, Newman et al. (2011) stated that current program outcomes do not always lead to student independence. This makes transition planning for IEP teams complex and challenging (Test & Grossi, 2011). Additionally, students who do not complete some sort of post-secondary or transition experience have lower rates of success in post-secondary outcomes compared to peers who complete programs and nondisabled peers alike (Targett, Wehman, West, Dillard, & Cifu, 2013).

Despite the availability of state programming for adult services, parents who have children with functional and cognitive disabilities are looking for other options to continue or add to a student's functional life skills, independent living, and participation in a team setting (Rehfeldt et al., 2012). To truly capture the needs and desires of families, research must focus on what parents are looking for to prepare their child for life after high school. Educational settings can offer meaningful programmatic outcomes that support student independence and match family goals with the proper research.

There has to be an understanding of how families select programs for their adult children to evaluate the current system and change future programming. In turn, this information will help guide instruction and program outcomes, determine fit for students within these programs, and assist service providers when working with families. This research determined how and why families select tuition-based residential transition programs for their children. Results from this study may help to inform the design of transition programs to better align and collaborate with parents to reach students' most significant potential and influence outcomes in local transition programs and high school settings.

### **Definition of Terms**

Throughout this body of work, the term *transition program* will be used. A transition program is considered an extension of the K-12 school setting and is available for students on Individual Education Plans to access post-high school or after twelfth grade. Students can remain in these programs until the IEP team decides or the age of 21 based on state and federal law. The term will also apply to residential life skills programs that are tuition-based. These programs do not have the exact age requirements as federally funded programs through public schools.

An *Individual Education Plan (IEP)* Team is defined by the Minnesota Department of Education (n.d.) as a designated group that plans, reviews, and makes education decisions for students. The team consists of the student, a parent or guardian, a special education teacher, a general education teacher, and a district representative. Additional team members may support student needs (e.g., a speech therapist).

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

Since this study utilized the qualitative method of focus groups, it is essential to consider the potential bias the researcher and participants may bring into the situation. The researcher of this study brought a specific bias being a special education teacher and special education director, and this previous experience was considered in the study design. Additional considerations are the restrictions a focus group provides. The sample size used in the context may not accurately represent all parents and families that access tuition programming. With limited participants from the greater Minneapolis area, this study provides a perspective specific to that region. Another limitation to this study's design is that results cannot be generalized to different states with different rules. It is assumed that further and more comprehensive research will be needed in addition to this body of work.

### **Nature of Study**

This qualitative study used focus groups to understand parent perspectives and their desired outcomes for students in 18-21-year-old transition programs in Minnesota. Additionally, the study explains why and how parents select programs. Understanding parental expectations allows individuals who work on transition services with students with functional and cognitive disabilities to better meet the needs of learners in their programs.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Special Education Law Historical Background**

Special education is a relatively new concept in the field of education. Having its roots marked in the civil rights movements of the 1960s, it was not until PL 94-142 in 1975 that students were finally protected by the law (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, n.d.). Section 504 of The Federal Rehabilitation Law guarantees free and appropriate education for students with disabilities. This is the foundation of the law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA has been revised, but its most current iteration was last revised in 2004. These amendments focused on continued federal commitments to dedicate highly qualified staff and a high level of educational accountability for students served (U.S. Department of Education (a), n.d.).

To understand how to service a student, a student's IEP team must understand the laws that govern the system (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010). A particular federal law states that all students need a transition assessment at age 14 (IDEA, 2004). The intent of the transition provision in IDEA supports planning for beyond high school. This is to ensure that the IEP and courses in high school align with student and family post-secondary goals. Once a student reaches 14 years of age, they must have a transition plan reflecting their strengths and needs on the IEP (IDEA, 2004). No Child Left Behind laws exist to support post-secondary planning for all students, including those with disabilities (NCLB, 2002).

There are two significant areas of consideration for parents with transition-eligible students within transition programs: continued programming through the school or tuition-based offerings. School districts in Minnesota offer transition programming until the age of 21, in accordance with federal and state law (IDEA, 2004). With this legal mandate, transition

programming is free of charge to families. This programming is an extension of the K-12 public school and can be housed in a separate location or within the local school district. Students typically live with their families as they gain transition skills by attending these programs during a school day. Likewise, there are a small number of residential, tuition-based transition programs available in the state of Minnesota. These programs allow students, who are 18-21 years old, to live on-site away from their parents as they learn transition skills. The idea is that students can better generalize transition-related skills by being immersed in a living situation close to that of neurotypical peers. As students move through programming, the IEP team becomes an integral part of the process. The team will help guide and support students and their families planning for life after high school.

### **Transition Taxonomy**

Highly trained professionals can support the IEP team in attaining student and family goals for transition planning (Kester, Beveridge, Flanagan, & Stella, 2019). These professionals support families in navigating the high school transition process and determining eligibility for a transition program. Students and parents continue to be the most critical IEP team members. As the IEP team develops plans, it is essential to note parent advocacy's significant role in the IEP process (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Understanding family needs and supporting various learning styles within the parameters of the IEP team is vital to a successful transition planning process. Using a framework to guide this process allows teams to consider a wide range of supports and include necessary team members to assist in the achievement of student goals.

Kohler's (1996) transition taxonomy is critical research in the transition planning process and supports team planning. The transition taxonomy has been used to measure effectiveness in transition programming, provide a guide for collaborative teams, and has been a springboard for

further research opportunities (Rehm et al., 2012). The transition taxonomy continues to show up throughout the literature. It supports IEP teams and related service providers in ensuring family and student goals are being met through various channels.

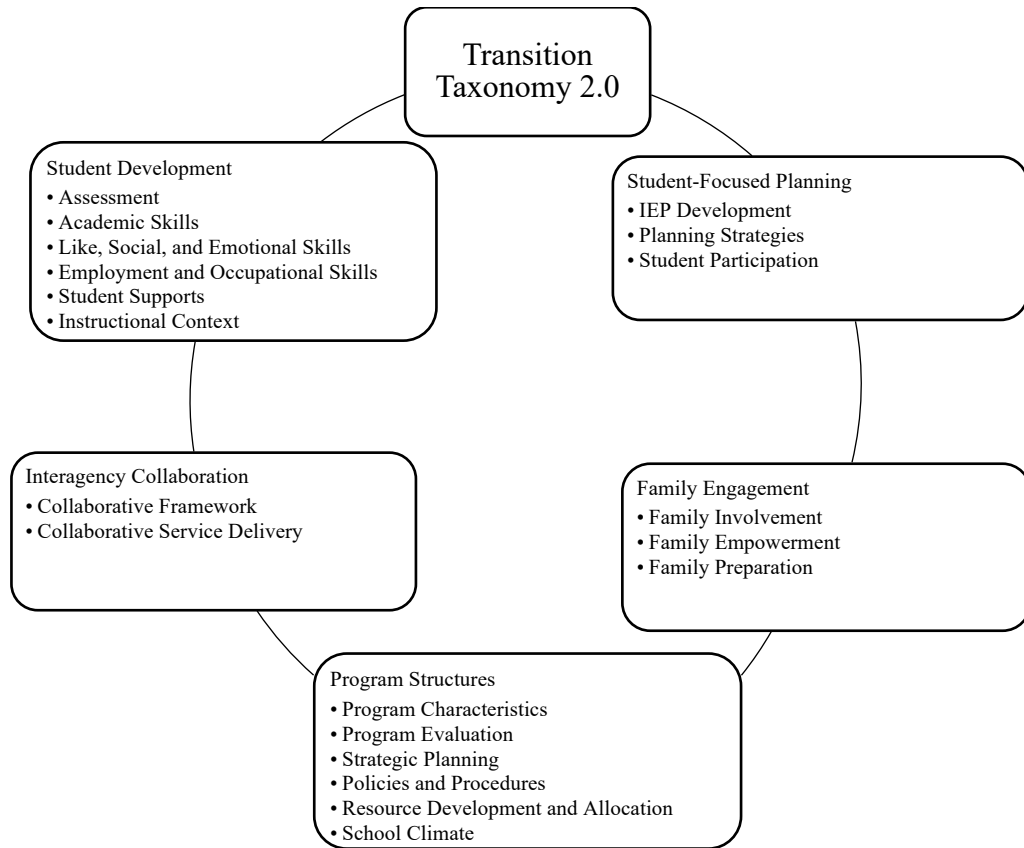


Figure 1. Transition Taxonomy 2.0 describing best practice in transition planning

In recent years, Kohler, Gothberg, Fowler, & Coyle (2016) have updated the taxonomy and titled their work Transition Taxonomy 2.0. The significance of this document and the taxonomy are at the foundation of transition research and IEP teams today (Kester et al., 2019). Components of the taxonomy include student-focused planning, family engagement, program structures, interagency collaboration, and student development (Kohler et al., 2016). These principal components are broken down into actionable steps for teams to use in the planning process. Kohler et al.'s (2016) framework is referenced frequently in IEP planning and research

applied to program outcomes. The significance of this framework is used across research to support students with disabilities, and it provides structure to discuss parent engagement in the IEP process. Using the transition taxonomy in transition planning ensures that to all aspects of student transition planning are considered, key stakeholders are present to make decisions, and families are consistently included in the transition process (Rehm et al., 2012). When all areas of the taxonomy are addressed in the planning process of the IEP, the team can ensure that there is alignment to student needs and goal areas. This is critical as the IEP team begins to plan specific services related to transition.

### **Transition Service Planning**

In preparing for a transition plan, the team considers all aspects of the student's strengths and needs to enlist a collaborative IEP team to determine a plan encompassing post-secondary, employment, and independent living skills (Gillis, 2006; Kohler, 2016; Kohler et al., 2016). These main focus areas guide the team in providing a holistic approach to plan for adult life. According to federal law, planning and preparation for transition starts early in high school and in preparation for post-secondary transition (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010). This law supports best practices in transition planning. The expectation is that an IEP team meets early in a student's high school career to design an individualized plan to match the outlined goals. Students focused on career development tend to be more successful after post-secondary experiences (Kester, Beveridge, Flanagan, & Stella, 2019; Lindstrom, 2007). Knowing the significance of concentrated career planning supports better planning for IEP teams which influences outcomes for students after high school.

Systematic efforts by IEP teams to bridge school and life goals begin early in high school. Transition planning is a critical part of the IEP process and guides the high school



coursework and connection to life after high school (Test & Grossi, 2011). To best plan, a good IEP team will use age-appropriate transition assessments and planning tools to match post-secondary goals with instruction while still in high school (Kohler, 1996; Rehfeldt et al., 2012). When designing a plan specific to the student, teams must consider results from these assessments and student interest. Assessment results coupled with clear goals outlined by the family, clarify goals for the team to accomplish.

Even with the best planning, students entering post-secondary programs must overcome many barriers to be successful (Lindstrom, 2007). Students with disabilities already have significant obstacles they must overcome that their non-disabled peers do not have to consider. A longitudinal study analysis of students in transition programs by Newman et al. (2014) maintained that the more severe the disability, the more likely students will struggle to complete a post-secondary program. Therefore, the IEP team has many hurdles to overcome as they plan and prioritize student and family goals (Hirano, Rowe, Lindstrom, & Chan, 2018). Knowing this, and using tools like Kohler et al.'s (2016) framework, can help teams consider how those hurdles will impact their work.

Direct and ongoing planning with an IEP collaborative team is vital to the successful foundation providing transition services to students on IEPs (Gillis, 2006). As students age, IEP teams grow as critical stakeholders increase with additional resources as students age. There are benefits in how high school transition programs link their services to various team members (for example, special education teacher to teach social skills and the job coach to teach a student how to use those skills in the workplace). This ensures that students build skills that apply and generalize across several environments in preparation for more robust transition programs or a possible exit from services when they reach adulthood (Cobb et al., 2013). Collaboration with

various community agencies may also help to extend similar service that were started in high school programs so the success of those outcomes are replicated in plans for life goals. (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010). Collaboration between all IEP members supports continued student growth as students move into transition programs. Kester et al. (2019) shared that this interagency collaboration supports students' long-term success when planning transition-related services. Connecting all IEP team members with interagency specialists, guidance counselors, and administrators provides a broad scope of options when planning transition services (Gillis, 2006). These large teams must prioritize frequent communication and collaboration throughout the transition planning process.

In preparing for a transition plan, the team considers all aspects of the student's strengths and needs and enlists a collaborative IEP team to determine a blueprint for the student (Gillis, 2006). Through high-quality assessment measures and parent input, the school develops a meaningful post-high school plan (Rehfeldt et al., 2012). The identified IEP team must understand all post-secondary options available through the school district and county services to suggest the program that meets the student's needs (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010). Furthermore, families and students must be prepared to enter a post-secondary institution to understand that laws protecting students until age 21 through the provision of IDEA are different from the laws protecting adults through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This change means the responsibility falls onto the student, who must then independently advocate for their needs and can no longer rely on the school district to carry out specific student plans, like the IEP (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010). This transition is often complex and misunderstood as families navigate the intricacies of varying bodies of law. The more a family is aware of this before the transition, the more successful the student will be in the desired program (Sprunger,

Harvey, & Quick, 2018). Targeted instructional opportunities for both students and families are critical to ensure that the move from IDEA to ADA is understood, and necessary accommodations are in place to support the student.

Lindstrom (2007) aligned research and IDEA legislation to determine that the two most important aspects of transition plans must include: 1) strategies to promote self-determination and student choice and 2) community-based services that prepare students for specific needs in post-secondary settings. Programs that follow this alignment by allowing student choice to guide programming have greater participation from students and families in the transition process. Additionally, student outcomes in programs where they can actively participate in the IEP process yield a higher completion of these goals (Test & Grossi, 2011). Including students in the process ensures that their goals and interests are represented in the plan and promotes self-advocacy. In turn, this leads to a comprehensive on-the-job experience that allows the student to work with job coaches and build self-determination and further advocacy opportunities (Rutkowski, 2006). Increasing opportunities for students' voices are critical in the transition planning process. Higher levels of self-determination are linked to students having greater choices and opportunities in employment and post-secondary options (Lindstrom, 2007).

Additionally, the second aspect Lindstrom (2007) provided an inclusive community-based experience for mastering transition-related goals and allowing students to generalize skills; this vital aspect is attractive to all IEP members. In giving an inclusive community-based experience, students have the opportunity to master transition-related goals and allowing students to generalize skills (Scott & Puglia, 2018). The goals the IEP team creates are the foundation of the transition plan.

### **Planning Goals as an IEP Team**

Students with special needs share a desire to attend a post-secondary training option, but very few enroll (Wei et al., 2016). These same students are less likely to graduate from post-secondary institutions and may earn less in their lifetime (Newman et al., 2011). This is the reality facing students and their families when eligible for special education services due to a disability. According to Rehm et al. (2012), parents want their children to be as independent and self-sufficient as possible. With this in mind, the link between completing a post-secondary experience and a greater quality of life aligns with parents' desired outcomes for their child (Thoma et al., 2011). Parents and their ability to advocate for their children support the goal planning process and school placements.

While students are best served in an environment similar to non-disabled peers, it is noted that transition programs focus on skills linking students to adult activities (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010; Thoma et al., 2011). It is essential to know this link when designing goals and aligning coursework for students in the transition-age range. As Kester et al. (2019) pointed out, the student's success is also linked to the availability of highly trained professionals, both in schools and in outside collaborative agencies, who understand transition outcomes and direct services models to support these outcomes. As students graduate from high school and their programming needs evolve into adulthood, IEP teams need to determine inclusive settings that promote independence and match parental expectations for life after high school (Thoma et al., 2011).

Little research is available to connect post-secondary interagency needs and the overall effectiveness of programming, which factors into parents' perception of program outcomes (Trach, 2012). This makes it challenging for the IEP team and families to navigate the next steps for students leaving high school. Further, Test & Grossi (2011) noted that little data support a

well-written IEP document as it relates to successful program outcomes. IEP goals and services dictate the instruction provided to students, thus influencing the actual transitional programming. Wei et al. (2016) wrote that linking goals to action through the IEP and all key stakeholders is the key to moving the needle on this issue. Using the IEP goals, measuring progress, and planning instruction will support the long-term success. Finally, there is a need for additional training for professionals in the transition field to link knowledge and expertise to available community-based outcomes that match family goals (Oretle, Sax, & Chelsey, 2017). All IEP members must know and understand the significance of developing a solid transition plan for students. With all of these variables, parents are left to make decisions based on criteria unique to their child and family situation.

### **Program Outcomes**

In theory, IEP teams should match student needs and goals to a specific transition program. Highly involved parents have particular expectations of what a post-secondary institution will provide their adult-child (Lee, Leon Jara Almonte, & Young, 2013). Matching needs identified by the IEP team with parent expectations should be the guiding force in developing a transition program. In turn, parent and family goals must match program outcomes and be included with the planning and decision-making on the IEP teams (Trach, 2012). Multi-faceted programs that include various programming features lend themselves to the most successful post-secondary engagement and future employability (Test & Cease-Cook, 2012). These programs allow the flexibility to match student goals and individualize the instructional experience. Programs that include these elements are essential features as IEP teams work to make decisions alongside parents. Finding inclusive experiences that support a link to academic goals and transition-related experiences can influence a teacher's perspective and influence

student instruction and program outcomes (Griffin & Papay, 2014; Scott & Puglia, 2018). This is noteworthy as parents work with their IEP teams to determine a program for their children.

Furthermore, having well-trained staff who understand both specifics of the disability and best practices in transition services supports students in moving towards their goals (Kester et al., 2019). Varied levels of training influence instructional outcomes for students and factor into parent decision-making. Research on these programs includes community-based learning, vocational training, and a complete transition program with well-developed outcomes (Test & Cease-Cook, 2012). Parents want transition-related programs to be meaningful and relevant to maximize their child's skills and match overall family goals (Hirano, Garbacz, Shanley, & Rowe, 2016; Rehm et al., 2012). For example, if a family values employability, they may gravitate towards programs that offer training for future jobs as an outcome. Successful transition programs can link transition-related goals to real-life outcomes (Scott & Puglia, 2018). Ultimately, matching family goals to program outcomes is most likely to yield the best long-term results to support students (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Parents know and understand what they want for their children and communicate those needs to the rest of the team.

Parents' connection and advocacy style drive IEP programming (Hirano et al., 2016). As parents work through the IEP process, they develop a list of desires for their children that match transition programmatic outcomes (Kohler, 1996; Papay & Bambara, 2014). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) described parental role construction factoring into school partnerships and end outcomes for their child. The parental role construct is described as motivation from a parent in supporting their child, which will play a prominent role in the advocacy process (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). How parents advocate for their children influences outcomes for students. Since transition instruction varies based on what the school district can provide and the

quality of the teachers, parents with solid advocacy styles will look outside of the district to find a program that addresses the needs they have identified as a priority for their adult-child (Hirano et al., 2016). As private institutions provide more opportunities for diverse learners within their campus, inclusion options create appealing offerings to parents looking for something more than their school district can provide. According to Thoma et al. (2011), parents are interested in transitional programs that allow access to typical peers. They mirror an experience similar to that of other students in their age range.

Understanding what parents want in a transition program is key to identifying program outcomes. Parents with students who have intellectual disabilities in Wagner et al.'s (2014) study stated they wished for their children to be as independent as their disability allows with a focus on growth opportunities. While each student brings an individualized need and unique interests, there are common aspects to transition planning which carry over into programmatic outcomes. Transition-related outcomes revolve around post-secondary opportunities, employment, and independent living skills (Oretle et al., 2017). Federal and Minnesota state statutes also mandate that teams address the three areas of transition (post-secondary, employment, and independent living), leading to greater success in adulthood. The educational experiences within transition programs are often linked to adult and community-based activities, with success measured by progress towards independence. Griffin et al. (2010) stated that parents prioritize programs that allow for long-term employability. In reviewing outcomes in the Beyond Limits Christian College, Bethel BUILD program, and Minnesota Independence College and Community, all three programs match programming to the shared results of sustained employability through certificate programs and increased independence in independent living and social situations.

## **Financial Means**

While various factors influence a student and family's choice to enter a specific institution, socioeconomic factors are high in a family's decision-making process (Lee et al., 2013). Based on this, families with more significant financial resources tend to be more involved with student IEP meetings and the planning process (Hirano et al., 2018; Trainor, Morningstar, & Murray, 2016). Unfortunately, students from non-white and lower-income families consistently have lower post-secondary outcomes (Hirano et al., 2018). Transition programs that rely heavily on parental involvement tend to attract parents who have time and money (Lee et al., 2013). Families with greater financial resources can look into more available programs.

Tuition-based transition programs in Minnesota allow students to have a residential experience that may range from \$30,000-\$50,000 a year, depending on access to residential offerings. Tuition in the Bethel BUILD program includes courses, supported living in a dorm to increase independence, access to campus activities, mentorship, and a meal plan. As students of Bethel University, they gain access to the same campus options available to resident college students with the support they need from staff. The Minnesota Independence College and Community programs offer tuition options for courses and a residential living option. Course tuition includes textbooks, course materials, staff support, and transportation options. Room and board are an extra fee and include housing, groceries, utilities, and access to the local YMCA. Enrollment in the Beyond Limits program offers supportive living in campus apartments, audited courses, life skills classes, work skills through campus employment, and a meal plan as a part of their tuition.



Families with financial access can provide more choices for their children and tend to explore additional options to match family goals with transition-related outcomes (Lee et al., 2013). Wagner, Newman, and Javitz (2014) saw a high correlation in post-secondary results based on parent engagement throughout school and an ability to advocate and communicate high expectations to the IEP team. Adequate income and advocacy styles and priorities that conflict with the school district lead parents to select outside options to support their child after the high school experience is over (Hirano et al., 2016).

### **Family Needs & Goals**

As students age out of the K-12 school system, family needs evolve from the school setting and into adult services (Kohler, 1996). Understanding and supporting this change is imperative for the IEP team to understand. The ability for families to rely on schools responsibility to support, educate, and provide family resources shifts from the school district to the student and family as students become adults (Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010). Students with special needs and their families are asked to reevaluate priorities and find programs that will meet the needs of both the student and the family (Rehm et al., 2012, 2013). As families face the reality of adulthood for their child with cognitive disabilities, they are also making decisions to support long-term programming for their child. Type of disability, cognitive functioning, and guardianship often dictate decision-making and programming options. Finally, when considering transition programs, families can drive decisions based on resources, time, and overall family goals differently from the school system (Hirano et al., 2018). The IEP team must understand the complex dynamics of the factors that play into the decision-making process to align family needs to overall student goals.

As the IEP team builds a relationship with a family, consideration of community and cultural values should become apparent. As teams navigate these norms, it is essential to note that cultural values influence family goals (Scott & Puglia, 2018). Specific cultural norms view disabilities in a different light. As families determine long-term care options for their students, not all want their students to live independently or learn functional life skills (Scott & Puglia, 2018). As teams determine transition-related outcomes, it is important to consider how cultural norms and expectations fit into family goals. Promoting open team dialogue and encouraging families to share their goals, desires, and wishes supports a collaborative team approach in reaching the families' end goals (Hoover Dempsey et al., 2005). Ultimately, ensuring that parents are valued team members aids in long-term IEP collaboration.

### **IEP Collaboration**

Parents play a critical voice in advocating for their child's needs in the IEP process. Having parents involved in the IEP planning process during their high school years increases the likelihood that a student will continue in a post-secondary program (Test & Cease-Cook, 2012). Not only does parent involvement ensure family goals are considered, but it also allows for a well-rounded team dynamic that supports collective decision-making. Collaboration is known to be a superior approach versus working in isolation to plan for postsecondary and vocational goals (Trach, 2012). Although the IEP system is designed to include parents in the decision-making process, parents often defer to other professionals on the team to help guide their decision-making (Sheehey, 2006). Transition IEP teams for students with cognitive disabilities tend to be large, with several professional experts sitting around the table. These teams should be reminded to provide opportunities for parents to share their wishes and participate in the IEP conversation. Parent voice is central to determining programming options and deciding on goals

that fit students' needs. Regarding transition planning, parents with high expectations for their child and the school see the most significant results, regardless of other factors (Wagner, Newman, & Javitz, 2014). Knowing this, educational teams should provide frequent opportunities for parents to engage in the decision-making and information-sharing process of transition planning. Rehm et al. (2012) stated that having a holistic approach to post-secondary planning, including aspects from all areas of the students' life, yields the highest level of success and is the most difficult to coordinate. Knowing that parents look to practitioners to guide decisions, Sheehey (2006) stated that IEP teams must have the background and understanding to offer suggestions and support parents in decision-making.

Throughout this process, parental involvement dictates the types of schools selected and the expectations held for the institution of choice (Lee et al., 2013). IEP teams benefit from knowing what options parents are choosing based on their family goals and needs. Sheehey (2006) recommended that IEP teams find ways to collaborate with families in the decision-making process as parents seek program options for their child. This can include ensuring the correct agencies are invited to planning meetings to provide information about transition-related options. When parents are invited to participate and become involved with school planning, they are more likely to be invested in school outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The IEP team should educate and encourage parents to engage in the transition planning process and avoid being passive participants (Hirano et al., 2018). Limiting educational jargon, providing information ahead of time to parents, and frequently asking them for their input are ideas to generate accessibility. Bringing student and family voices to the IEP meeting, and allowing them to participate, allows for greater success in program outcomes (Test & Grossi, 2011). This is why team members should find ways for parents to be involved and to have their voices heard

when making significant placement decisions (Sheehey, 2006). A greater the level of collaboration in the post-secondary process, ensures the likelihood of a successful outcome that aligns with family goals (Hirano et al., 2018; Trach, 2012). IEP teams need to embrace family input and ensure that each meeting includes family voice and family goals. Parents desire their child to be seen as an individual, and school services benefit from considering parent input when developing a transition plan (Rehm et al., 2012). It is clear that parents who persist through the decision-making phase of the transition process find benefits in the collaborative experience that match their values and reflect the goals they have for their child (Sheehey, 2006).

### **Interagency Collaboration**

A strong indicator of successful transition services includes outside agencies collaborating on shared IEP goals. As school-led teams work to find interagency providers, it becomes increasingly difficult to find agencies with the capacity to partner with schools due to staffing and financial constraints (Trainor et al., 2016). Furthermore, school teams often have limited resources to make these connections. Typical interagency supports include vocational rehabilitation services, county social workers, private therapists, and job coaches. Together with the school team, these supports can assist families in their efforts to access specific resources that match family goals. Well-connected families and caregivers can often bridge the collaboration by organizing the team more efficiently (Hirano et al., 2018). This action aids in ensuring that parents can have their goals supported and all perspectives and viewpoints around the table will be heard.

### **Parent Voice**

Parents play an essential role in the IEP process and drive adult outcomes for their children with disabilities (Gillis, 2006; Sheehey, 2006; Test & Grossi, 2011). Parent

involvement factors into transition planning and the selection of transition-related programs. When a family is involved in transition-related planning, the chance of students attending a postsecondary training or college program increases 41 times (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Knowing this, IEP teams must continue to involve parents in all aspects of the transition planning process and ensure their voice is heard.

While teams know that having parents present is the best option, it isn't always easy to engage parents in the process. Parents' perception of their knowledge factors into their willingness to be involved in school planning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). For educational professionals and those in the field to best collaborate, parent voices must be a part of research-based practices that drive student outcomes (Hirano et al., 2018). Teams must create space for parents to be engaged in the planning process. Allowing parents and students to share their viewpoints will help structure new programming and provide better learning environments for individuals with disabilities (Trainor et al., 2016).

Furthermore, family expectations and standards drive positive program outcomes (Papay & Bambara, 2014). The more that a family expects of their child, the more involved they are, the higher the student's chance to enroll and complete a postsecondary program (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Wagner, Newman, & Javitz, 2014). Knowing these aspects that influence parent voice can help professionals invite families into conversations and involve them in transition-related planning.

### **Potential Barriers in Transition Planning**

Navigating aspects of the IEP process is complicated. Parents experience many barriers that make transition planning difficult. Understanding such barriers can increase collaboration with the team and increase the likelihood of developing a plan that matches family goals (Hirano

et al., 2018). Obstacles get in the way of the planning process and can lead to decision fatigue with parents. Rehm et al. (2013) shared that the daily stressors of caring for a child with additional needs make it challenging to think long-term and keep up with daily care and required advocacy. Limited and inconsistent training can serve as massive barriers to families as they plan postsecondary activities. Hirano et al. (2018) shared that key collaborative player (such as school team members or interagency supports) can have harmful guiding philosophies on student independence and limited knowledge of best practices in the field of transition. Likewise, irregular and inadequate funding for specific disability areas can leave some families with little to no support as their best-laid plans are left behind when their children exit the public school system (Oertle et al., 2017). Finally, parents often share feeling unsupported as an advocate and a team member in the process of transition (Hirano et al., 2018). Such barriers make it difficult for families to both know and access care beyond what is provided within the context of an IEP meeting.

## **Conclusion**

Connecting the legal requirements of transition to an actionable plan that promotes success for students is the foundation of developing a quality postsecondary program for students (Wei et al., 2016). The goal of the transition IEP team is to create a meaningful post-high school plan where the team can work with the student and family goals. This work takes a team of professionals who know and understand the IEP process and can support parents in providing information that will match their family needs. As IEP teams design individual programming for students, it is essential for ongoing collaboration with all team members (Trainor et al., 2016). This collaborative process yields a more robust individualized plan that aligns with student and family goals.

Furthermore, communication of high expectations and shared goals is critical in the planning process (Wagner, Newman, & Javitz, 2014). To know and understand what a family wants, professionals on the team must include parents' voices and allow them to share goals specific to the family's needs (Scott & Puglia, 2018). These identified goals serve as the underpinning in the transition plan, programming, and goals the team will use in student-specific programming. Ensuring this match is made will increase the likelihood of success in the eyes of the family after postsecondary programs are completed (Hirano et al., 2018). Understanding and addressing parental barriers in the transition process can help teams support parents in accessing the long-term support and collaboration needed to prepare their child for adulthood (Rehm et al., 2012). Additionally, Oertle et al. (2017) stated that having strong interagency support to help provide parents with information in their decision-making process is an important step to engage parents in the process of accessing transition services.

There are many considerations as parents begin selecting postsecondary options for their children. Teams that understand the family's end goal are most successful at matching transition programs to family needs (Trach, 2012). Other considerations that families struggle within the transition process are financial means to pay for programming, programmatic outcomes that match the need of their students, and overarching transition-related goals (Rehm et al., 2012, 2013). Professionals supporting transition-aged students must know and understand what parents look for within a transition program, as well as what features of programs are attractive in meeting their child's needs. By allowing parent voice and family engagement to be central in the IEP planning process, teams can provide the best service to students and their families.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### **Introduction & Purpose of Study**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored factors that influence the decision families of students with disabilities make to attend tuition-based life skill programs in Minnesota. Specifically, this study examined how parents decide on transition programs and expectations for these program outcomes. Since parents select a specific program for their students, it makes the most sense to ask them how they managed the decisions and to share their authentic experience with operating the complexities of the transition process. Selecting a qualitative phenomenological approach allows for exploration of what participants think and feel while providing space for further investigation based on what the participant shares (Creswell, 2009).

As parents of students with disabilities are provided programming options after high school, questions remain as to why and how parents select tuition-based transition programming options. To discover parental reasoning in the selection process, several small focus groups were created with parents who have enrolled their adult children in tuition-based residential programs in the state of Minnesota. Using focus groups allows for a better understanding of how people think and feel by using specific discussions and questions. Responses were critically analyzed to reveal themes to the research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Gaining insight into how families make decisions when planning post-secondary options for students with disabilities helps shape further transition research and develop transition program outcomes.

### **Theoretical Framework**



Data for this study was collected through three focus group panels. The format allowed parents to share their lived experiences and for the researcher to gain insight as to why and how parents are making decisions related to their child. This phenomenological qualitative study employs a phenomenological perspective and a social constructivist perspective.

To truly understand how a parent is deciding for their child, they must share their specific lived experiences. Participants are encouraged to share their thoughts, decision-making, and critical experiences in a phenomenological study. In turn, this is used to establish clarity of why and how parents went through the decision-making process when selecting a tuition-based transition program. To gather data specific to this experience, a focus group offers the opportunity for rich discussion through questions that promote reflection and support extract deeper meaning from factors that contribute to the decision-making process that individual families go through (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

A phenomenological study design coupled with social constructivism theory supported the researcher in taking in each participant's story as a meaningful contribution that informs each step in transition-related programming. Social constructivism frames the participants' beliefs as important and significant and believe that participants create meaning through their personal experience (Creswell, 2009). This is especially important to note since the research design is intended to gather parent feedback so that we might better understand the steps and process parents employ as they make critical decisions about their child's future and quality of life. The meaning and insight provided suggest something new about the experience of selecting transition programs for families.

### **Researcher Positionality**

For almost two decades, the researcher has been a high school special education teacher and special education school administrator. Most of that time was spent working directly with students accessing post-secondary programming for students in 18-21-year-old programs. Additionally, the researcher spent countless hours working with families in the post-secondary preparation and planning process. Many parents question the effectiveness of these programs compared to the tuition-based options they have often heard advertised in the media or from other parents. Time and time again, there was little research in this specific area to support parents as they made this decision. Throughout these experiences, the researcher questioned the advantages that tuition-based programs had over local public programs, wondering if there was something else that could be done to support students who didn't have sufficient financial means or parental support. This curiosity resulted in research questions that provided the framework for this research study. By determining what key stakeholders are looking for and what motivates them to seek out and financially commit to programs other than those provided free of cost in their school districts, we might understand what is missing in our current transition settings and how improvement in those programs might support more satisfactory outcomes, increase program options, and greater equity for family across the socioeconomic spectrum.

The researcher's position allowed a perspective an outsider would not know. Years of case management experience in postsecondary planning let the researcher know which questions to ask in a research setting and how to interact with parents who have children with disabilities. Likewise, the researcher was mindful of any bias in the process. Questions generated for the focus group were reviewed for potential bias by the dissertation team. Additionally, using a coding and inter-rater reliability system in the data analysis supported greater accuracy in the research results.

## **Research Questions**

Although school districts offer programs at no cost to parents, parents pay for these services in the private sector. This research study answers the following questions:

1. What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs?
  - a. What are major priorities and themes that parents focus on in transition programs?
2. How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child into?
  - a. What factors are present in this decision-making process?
  - b. How might local school district resources play into this decision?
  - c. What main factors do parents cite for enrolling in private, tuition-based transition programs instead of school district programs?

## **Sampling Design**

This study used purposeful sampling to select a group of individuals that would provide the best insights (Creswell, 2009). The three focus groups interviewed consisted of four to six parents who have students currently enrolled or who have completed programming in the past two years in any of the tuition-based programs in Minnesota. The time limit of two years was intentional to capture recent data and ensure an accurate account from participants. The list of parents was accessed through each school (Bethel BUILD program, Minnesota Independence College and Community, and the Beyond Limits Christian College); an email was sent asking for interested parties, ensuring the data collected was from individuals willing to share their experience. Participants needed to have been the sole or shared decision-makers in transition-

related programming to be eligible to participate in the study. Groups were generated with equal membership from each school to offer a balanced perspective, and focus groups were randomized to draw various experiences in the discussion.

**Procedure to access sample.** The sample was accessed through a partnership with Minnesota's three private transition schools. A list was provided by each respective school of parents or guardian decisions makers who have enrolled their child in the program in the past two years. Participants voluntarily agreed to be part of the focus group. Focus groups consisted of four to six members to adequately dive into answering the questions. Focus groups were randomized, representing different institutions and parents at other places in the journey (ex: currently enrolled and recently graduated). This allowed for conversation from a variety of perspectives.

### **Setting**

Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, focus groups were conducted online to follow health and safety guidelines. Focus groups were scheduled for ninety-minute blocks at various times of the day to get the desired data and be respectful of participants' time.

### **Instrumentation Measures**

The researcher facilitated the focus group discussions with field-tested questions by a group of individuals knowledgeable about qualitative research and special education. Questions were designed to get at the decision-making process and evoke reflection to determine meaning through the discussion. Initial questions for the study included, but were not limited to the following:

- Tell us about your child and their transition goals.
- How did these goals influence your planning for post-high school?

- Why did you select the program you did over other programs?
- How did you feel throughout the selection process?
- How did you go through the decision-making process of selecting a program to match your child's needs?
- Knowing public school districts are required to provide transition programming until the age of 21, why did you consider paying for programming instead of staying in the free programming?
- What help or support did you have to decide to enroll in the transition program selected?
- What features of the program you enrolled in were important to you and your family?
- How did those features match you and your child's transition goals?
- How did the transition program you selected to match your child's goals?
- How did your goals and priorities change over the course of your programming?
- What advice would you have for a parent on a similar path as you?
- In what ways did the program meet your family goals? What specific outcomes would you cite?
- How did your child feel to be a part of a transition program like this?

These questions served as a guiding framework. Additional follow-up and probing questions were asked to gain more significant meaning and collect data.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected through the questions during the focus groups. The questions were generated based on the core research questions for this study. Questions started broad and then gained specificity as participants shared information. Probing questions allowed for clarity of

the research questions and further information (Krueger & Casey, 2009). All focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Additionally, any written information captured in the chat feature of Zoom will be used in the data collection process. All participants signed a confidentiality statement to ensure that information shared was protected. An additional invitation was offered during the focus group session if a participant would like to share feedback on a specific question. Focus groups were recorded on the Zoom platform and transcribed for data analysis. A backup recording was also created using another recording device in case of technical errors.

### **Data Analysis**

All recorded data was downloaded and transcribed to be coded by the researcher. Data were analyzed by first reading through the transcriptions using the classic analysis strategy (Krueger & Casey, 2009). After the first read-through, subsequent read-throughs looked for specific trends. Data sets looked for general themes and critical takeaways for new learning. Krueger & Casey (2009) shared the following questions that helped guide the categorizing experience:

1. Did the participant answer the question?
2. Does the comment answer a different question in the focus group?
3. Does the comment answer something of importance about the topic?
4. Is this like something that has been said earlier? (p. 120).

A color-coding system was used to code various parts of the transcripts and notes into specific themes for analysis. This process continued until all quotes from the focus group were assigned categories. Merriam (2009) defined categories as themes, patterns, and findings that answer a specific research question. Additional considerations of frequency of items said specificity of

comments, participant emotions, and extensiveness of the focus group's various people helped determine the categories (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Along with transcript analysis, supplemental field notes were typed up and reviewed. After the study, the recordings and notes were deleted.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Using focus groups allows for a profoundly personal opportunity to share experiences. However, a focus group has limitations in sample size. The groups needed to have equal representation from each school to offset this. Additionally, detailed and thorough questions were asked to get a valid data set to report. Limited participation could have occurred in the study because volunteers were needed to complete the focus groups. To find a rich base of participants, the researcher partnered with school leadership to generate a list of individuals willing to share their experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study followed the Internal Review Board process through Bethel University. This process ensured that the human subjects in the study understood their rights and were protected throughout the process. This was completed through a written proposal and with all questions, permissions, and protocols for research attached. The study did not begin until this process had been completed.

Participants provided informed consent and were given assurance of their privacy and confidentiality throughout the focus group and data analysis. During analysis, documents with participant information were secured, and identifying information was not recorded in the results section. This was done by removing real names and destroying all recordings and notes once the data had been analyzed. Before starting the focus group, confidentiality processes were reviewed with participants to ensure participants understood the consent form. Additionally, this

helped to create a safe place to share information. Group norms were shared and enforced throughout the focus group. These norms were a part of the confidentiality statement participants signed. Additionally, all participants understood the purpose of the study and how the results would be used. Researcher bias was addressed throughout the data analysis by only using verbatim statements, having a system for coding data, and securing a check for inter-rater reliability. This ensured coding and data analysis were consistent.

A well-designed study on this topic can influence programming and support families in planning for future independent living scenarios. Throughout this process, user confidentiality was maintained, study limitations were managed, and research bias was addressed through inter-rater reliability. These measures were taken to ensure this study was well-designed and would yield data that supports further research and adds insights to better support families.



## Chapter 4: Results of Study

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn how parents select tuition-based transition programs. Bringing in the parent perspectives and insights provided in this process helps those who work with students with disabilities offer programming that matches family goals and supports parents in selecting programming after high school.

Throughout this chapter, the content of the focus groups will be discussed. Each focus group will be described in detail. This will contain the raw data shared by the participants of the focus group and the analysis of findings. After transcribing focus group audio, the data was analyzed through the Classic Approach analysis strategy (Kruger & Casey, 2009). Carefully crafted questions and inter-rater reliability obtained valid results from the focus groups. The final data was from almost 5 hours of transcribed focus group interviews and field notes.

### **Overview of Study**

Data for this study was gathered through responses from the focus group sessions. Ten parents participated in three focus group sessions. In each focus group, open-ended questions were posed. Throughout the focus group, ongoing facilitation was provided to ensure that all parents could share answers to the questions. Additionally, participants were made aware of the study through the informed consent process. After the focus group, parents were provided the option of follow-up interviews if they wanted to share additional information outside of the group setting. No parents in any of the focus groups requested a follow-up interview, which indicates they felt they had shared the information they needed within the focus group time. The answers to the questions served as the vehicle to obtain the data in the research. After the focus groups were completed, responses were transcribed and analyzed using the Classic Approach

strategy. After the focus group recordings were transcribed, the raw data was read through in its entirety. Data was then grouped by theme and color-coded to coordinate each research question. This process was repeated until all data was coded. The remainder of this chapter will analyze the coded data.

The study was designed to capture answers to the following questions: 1) What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs? And 2) How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child in? It is important to note that parent responses to both questions often used current examples to better explain their expected outcomes and goals when making decisions. At times, parents made connects to current programming and what they expected and desired from the program. This data was then gathered, transcribed, and analyzed to answer these framing research questions.

### **Format of Focus Groups**

Participants were invited from a newsletter produced by each respective institution: Bethel BUILD program, Minnesota Independence College and Community (MICC), and Beyond Limits. Email communication was used to organize the date and time that worked for all interested participants. The focus groups were conducted in the Zoom platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each focus group started with introductions and an overview of the informed consent. Participants were then asked the interview questions and any follow-up or clarification questions. Responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed after all groups were completed. Table 1, 2, and 3 in this chapter display the participants demographics from each focus group.

### **Focus Group One**

## Participants.

Table 1

### *Focus Group One Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Transition Program	Year of Student in Program
Parent 1	MICC	Adult Living-Graduated
Parent 2 & 3	Bethel BUILD Program	1 <sup>st</sup> year
Parent 4	Bethel BUILD Program	2 <sup>nd</sup> year

Parent 1's son participated in the MICC program, graduated from the program, and currently participates in their adult living program. Parent 1 went through the journey of finding a transition program for her son while she was going through her own personal health concerns. She discussed the challenges in finding a support system as well as her relief in finding a program that fully understood her son's social and academic needs. Finding a program that matched his needs felt overwhelming to Parent 1. She described the process and emotions that went into the selection process and explained the stress and angst in feeling like there were no options. However, once she found MICC, she was relieved that the staff there were not "phased" by her son's needs and felt that they understood his needs and goals. Parent 1 discussed the need for a hands-on program that was not rooted in academics or textbooks. She described how her son's advocacy increased and his understanding of himself and his disability, which will be describe later. He is currently employed at a job he enjoys and accesses continued support through the adult program. He lives independently with a family friend and cooks, cleans, and manages his basic daily needs.

Parents 2 and 3 are married and have a daughter in the Bethel Build program as a first-year student. Throughout the duration of the analysis, their responses will be combined because they had the same shared experience. Extrapolating their data as one made the most sense because they often finished sentences for each other or looked to the other to expand on a thought. They discussed how they found the program when they went on a tour with their older daughter during her college search. Every year, they would check in with the program and learn more about it. In the end, they thought they had to complete the district transition program, but their county social worker supported them to pursue this private option and complete a county waiver to assist them financially. It was essential to Parents 2 and 3 that the decision to attend a program was up to their daughter. In the end, she selected the Bethel BUILD program and has grown in her advocacy skills since starting.

Parent 4 has a son in the Bethel BUILD program as a year two student. She found Bethel searching after a “bad experience” in the district’s transition program. Parent 4 shared a lack of options for her student and is glad that the Bethel Build program has inclusive experiences to support her son. The family is starting to think beyond Bethel BUILD about what will happen next for independent living options.

## **Analysis**

### **Focus Group 1- Research Question 1.**

**RQ1.** What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs?

A central part of the decision-making process is matching program outcomes to their child’s needs. Research question one focuses on what outcomes played an important role in the decision-making process. Parents in this study reported looking for outcomes that match their

students' individual needs and desires. Parent 1 shared that a residential program fit the requirements for her son. Additionally, it was vital for her to find a program that didn't focus on academics and book learning but provided a different approach. Specifically, "The reading and the textbooks and the academic portion never was anything he looked toward or was very successful. I know that's how we got there, and that's part of the decision-making." She described the application process and shared that she felt the team at MICC would genuinely understand her son and his needs, "Everything was normal for them, everything that was their typical student was someone who functions like [my son]." The outcomes for parent 4 were different. She was looking to continue inclusive experiences and a better fit than the district transition program for her son. She said, "Bethel was really more of an ability to extend that time of life, where he has true peers, true like-aged peers that don't have special needs, all around him...we still have some of that opportunity." It was vital for her to find a fit for her son, even though the fit and need differed from what other parents shared. Additionally, in the district transition program, the student of Parent 4 could not take college courses at the local technical college due to the high level of academics involved that were inaccessible to him due to his disability. Whereas, Bethel had academic studies that were scaffolded to his learning needs and allowed him access to that aspect of the program. Parents 2 and 3 wanted their child to find the fit for their daughter and grow in developing an identity and goals that were personal to them, "we kind of left the majority of the choice up to her." While the plans were specific to each family, understanding the fit of the program and desire of the child played into fit of the outcomes that each program provided.

Matching student needs to the program was not the only factor parents shared. Another layer of decision-making is matching the program to overall family needs. Parent 1 shared that

her physical health was in a place that didn't allow her to care for and teach her child in the way she knew he needed, "I knew that my physical body was tapped out, so I knew my emotional reserves to be able to support him in his trial and errors of learning independence was going to be severely impaired." Due to this family need, she knew she needed to select a program that provided a range of transition-related skills. This allowed her child the access he needed and the space to focus on her physical health. Matching a program to family needs and goals was important for families as they determined program outcomes. For example, Parents 2 and 3 talked about ensuring that their child was included in deciding where to attend. Having a program that matches the family goal was influential in the decision-making process. Parent 1 described looking at various programs, including the Bethel BUILD program, before deciding on MICC,

MICC is a population of young adults on the spectrum and with significant learning differences...to be able to participate in this program and I just felt like he was more able to be himself, which then increased his self-awareness and his self-advocacy about his disabilities. That it just became a really safe place.

She went on to share the importance of the program being a fit for her child's academic needs and a fit for what was needed as a family. This was especially important due to health concerns and issues she was facing. Likewise, Parent 4 described the district transition programming as not being a fit. Her decision to look at residential programs was prompted by not having the right fit in the district. In the focus group, she stated that she would have stayed if the district program had internships and realistic community experiences. These factors contributed to enrollment in the Bethel BUILD program. Based on the needs identified by the family, this was an important outcome for them in the decision-making process.

Providing students with realistic experiences where they can authentically learn skills and generalize those skills to a real-world environment was an expected outcome in programming that was important to parents. All parents in the focus group mentioned this as a significant growth area for their children. Now that their children have participated in these transition programs, they identify skills, such as laundry, as an example of that outcome. Parent 1 explained how having someone else teach her son these skills made it more effective and less stressful. She said:

MICC really fit the bill for us because it is the hands-on learning again about how to live in an apartment, how to live with roommates, how to get on the bus, how to keep track of your money, how to go grocery shopping, all of those things were deliberately taught by someone else. Which is key!

When selecting a program, she knew he needed this level of support to be independent. Additionally, she shared that these experiences were still part of his success when he graduated from the program. She often gets invited over for dinner by her son and can see how these skills are generalized and applied in real life. For Parents 1, 2, and 3, having these realistic experiences has been key outcomes they want in a transition program. While they didn't initially draw them into the program, they can see how these experiences have allowed their child to be more independent. All families in this focus group wanted a natural environment to learn life skills. In addition, parents shared that learning these real-life skills was different from living at home or participating in a district setting because the student's living arrangements made it more meaningful to the learner. Supporting lifelong skills like laundry, cooking, and finances were shared as key outcomes parents were looking for in selecting a program. All four parents discussed how their child independently participating in laundry, cooking, and cleaning was an

outcome that was an excellent addition to core program outcomes. Parent 2 and 3 said, “you just can't compare it to like living and actually doing things versus being taught about them. I mean laundry. She has to do it; no one is there to do it for her.” Seeing how their child participated in these skills and could apply them to their setting with limited support was an important program feature.

Practicing life skills in a natural setting was an outcome for all parents, which differed from district programming. When asked about engaging in the district’s transition program, all parents shared that a program in the district couldn’t replicate what a residential transition program could provide. For example, Parents 4, 2, and 3 stated that the district didn’t have the offerings, staffing, grouping, and environment to offer a similar experience. Parents 2 and 3 said, “she can't really soar at the district program, at least not to the capacity that Bethel offers. Not only socially, but academically... you have more one-on-one smaller group teaching”. Parent 4 said that safety and grouping concerns when her child entered the district transition program had her looking into different programming. She shared that he was vulnerable and placed in a group that wasn’t the best fit. “I probably would have if there was more of a value to the program and there weren't safety concerns.” Not feeling that her child was safe or making improvements on skills ultimately prompted them to search for different options. As parents were searching for settings that had an environment that focused on the development of skills, they used the application process to determine what outcomes were present in programs. Parents 2 and 3 shared that the application process helped them discover opportunities for their child. They noted that students have to be a good fit for the program, which differs from district mandates that all students who qualify are given the services.



I think it's comparing the options, I mean, we had this great opportunity at Bethel, and then through the district, it was it was a two-hour college class wrapped around a shell of what felt like a babysitting program.

Residential transition programs can select students that match their program outcomes and provide a more excellent array of customized services.

Parents 2 and 3 discussed how important it was for their child to have a voice in the process, “she was good at advocating in high school, but now she's having to advocate even more for herself.” Even after a short time in the transition program, they have seen an increase in their daughter’s self-advocacy skills. They emphasize this skill as being necessary for lifelong success. This is similar to Parent 4, who shared that her child was unaware of his disability and truly enjoyed being around typical peers. “For us like Bethel was really more of an ability to extend that time of life, where he has true peers.” Having a program that understood student needs and desires was an important outcome.

Having programs with lifelong support was an attractive outcome for some parents. Parent 1 found the appeal of having support built-in for her child that lasted into adulthood, “realizing that he was going to need some support throughout his life, this was not an academic thing, this was not just once he's done with school he'll be fine. That was one of the draws for MICC was the Community program.” He can participate in various classes that connect him to people and additional support. Because of their family needs, this was an important outcome. Parent 4 shared this as a concern with the Bethel BUILD program. She is looking for the next steps for her child after this program is done and expressed her desire to be able to network with other parents and to be able to start thinking about the these steps before the last semester of the program, “I wanted to pick people's brains and hear about these post-Bethel students and where

they're living and what they're doing.” Other factors shared by families were the limited options available for transition and adult learning. Families described long waitlists and limited opportunities, which have been made worse due to COVID and staffing shortages. Families mentioned being frustrated by these compounding factors.

Parents in the focus group also encountered barriers in overall transition programming. All families described limited options for tuition-based transition programs. Of the parents interviewed, they all told of a journey to find independent programming. Parent 1 described the process as terrible and lonely, “It was so demoralizing and terrifying to do it on my own.” Parents 2 and 3 shared that, while the county worker and case manager were helpful, they weren’t aware of all tuition-based options. Parent 4 was incredibly disappointed about the lack of opportunities and creativity in the district-based transition level programs.

In summary, families are looking for programs that match their family needs and their child’s needs. Furthermore, having programs with clear outcomes connected to real-life experiences is central to the decision-making process of families. Finally, having a transition option that provides growth for the student is essential and a critical factor in how parents make decisions.

### **Focus Group 1- Research Question 2.**

**RQ2.** How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child in?

Research question two focuses on how parents made the decision to enroll in the program their child is attending. All parents in the focus group describe the limited options for their adult children with disabilities. Having a narrow range of programs available is part of the decision process for parents. Parent 4 expressed that she had to select the one that made sense for her

child's needs of the limited options. In her case, an extension of the inclusive experience he had in high school was a priority,

I don't feel like there's like some huge array of options, at least from my experience...Then our transition person did not think he should go to the other option we had for transition; that was our only option. To land at BUILD, for us, was about the continued inclusiveness.

As she looked into options outside of the school transition program, the Bethel BUILD program made the most sense. Likewise, Parent 1 talked about attending a college fair and walking around the booths,

I found Groves Academy in St Louis Park has a college fair every year, and with that, they have representatives from across the country. They send primarily their disability team....and set up a table. And that that was a horrible night, a horrible, horrible night... I'm walking around, and I'm finding all these academic programs.... he's not going to be studying, and that's where we found MICC. That was an extremely valuable resource.

The experience left her discouraged because nothing was the right fit. When she landed on MICC, she knew it had the support her child would need without focusing heavily on academics.

Parents in the focus group had students with various needs and end goals. They all shared a commonality: a complete and deep understanding of their child, what they needed to be successful, and a clear idea of the goals and outcomes required. This continued to be an essential theme and central to the decision-making process as families enrolled in respective programs. Parents talked about understanding which schools were not a good fit in the decision-making process. For example, Parent 1 shared that she looked into the Bethel BUILD program but felt that it was too academic for her child. Likewise, Parent 4 discussed that the district

programming was unsafe and they needed to look elsewhere for a better fit. Parents 2 and 3 let their child select the programming but presented offerings that matched her skills and needs versus programs that wouldn't be a good fit.

A notable feature in the decision-making process was the discussion around having someone supporting them in the process. Parents in the focus group shared that it was a lonely process, even though a person (or team) was often assigned to their family. Parent 1 described a school counselor who was not supporting the idea of MICC and the disappointment and fear she felt in the selection process, "I remember telling the counselor at [the school] that MICC looked really good and a real possibility for [my son]. I was extremely disappointed that she reacted with surprise". It wasn't until she met with staff at MICC that she felt heard and understood. Parents 2 and 3 spoke of a county social worker and the school case manager, "The county helped us a ton with the waiver, I mean, they were there to support us. Her case manager, you know we told her, she was surprised and at school". The county social worker supported the family with the cadid waiver process and shared that they didn't need to do programming through the school district if they wanted to enroll in a private program. Parent 4 shared that the lack of programming that fit her child put her primary person, the school transition case manager, in a place to have to pick between two options that didn't fit her child's needs. Due to not having a knowledgeable advocate, parents were left to find programs independently or with limited support of the school or team. Parents 2, 3, and 4 shared that they felt the programming in the district was a step down from what they received in high school and had a lack of inclusion and real-life experiences. Finding a program that kept their child developing more skills and in an environment that provided real-life experiences proved to be critical to the parents and their decision-making process.

## Focus Group Two

### Participants.

Table 2

*Focus Group Two Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Transition Program	Year of Student in Program
Parent 5 & 6	Bethany Beyond Limits	1 <sup>st</sup> year
Parent 7	Bethel BUILD Program	Graduated
	Bethany Beyond Limits	1 <sup>st</sup> year
Parent 8	MICC	3 <sup>rd</sup> year

Parents 5 and 6 had a son at the Bethany Beyond Limits program in his first year. Parents 5 and 6 are married and shared the same experience. Throughout the duration of the analysis, their responses will be combined because they had the same shared experience. Extrapolating their data as one made the most sense because they often finished sentences for each other or looked to the other to expand on a thought. Parents 5 and 6 found Beyond Limits after completing the district transition program. Together they spoke about the journey to find the right fit for programming, following their child's lead in the process, and looking for feedback to ensure growth through the process. Parents 5 and 6 said they have been surprised at their son's development with communication skills since starting the program and are happy to have the supportive community of Beyond Limits available for residential programming.

After completing the district transition program, Parent 7's child attended the Bethel Build program. After graduation, they continued the college experience at Bethany Beyond Limits. Parent 7 believes strongly in inclusion settings, natural supports, and the strengths of

friendships and relationships formed in inclusive environments. Taking the lead from their child, Parent 7 focused on partnering with a team that supported the family goal of an inclusive setting.

After two years of advocacy and attempts to secure employment, Parent 8 stumbled on MICC after a recommendation from a contact his sister knew. Parent 8 described the challenges in working alone to help his child find his way in finding a job. Currently, Parent 8's child lives in an apartment with roommates, working part-time, and uses public transportation. Parent 8 commented on the growth observed throughout the program and voiced frustration over the inability of employers to see the strength in adults with disabilities and what they can offer to the workplace.

## **Analysis**

### **Focus Group 2- Research Question 1.**

**RQ1.** What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs?

Parents in this focus group wanted results that matched their students' individual needs and desires. All parents in focus group two shared an appreciation for the sense of community gained for their children. Parent 7 spoke to her strong belief in inclusion and natural supports stating,

My philosophy is to be in that place where people without disabilities are to bring supports to support [my son] or support the individual to be successful, there and then withdraw support as they gain skills and so has guided our efforts through K 12 schools and transition.

A program where students live in the same community as non-disabled peers allow for access to a philosophy that is important to their family. Parents 5 and 6 spoke to the community, new

friendships with peers on campus, and an increased communication skills that have allowed their child to have additional opportunities to be part of the community. They shared, “We went into it hoping that he'd learned some of the practical skills like scheduling and the daily living skills...he loves that community.” Parent 8 shared that his son now has friends that he never had in previous experiences, which validated his decision, “...he has peers that he really enjoys spending time with. The hardest part about watching him grow up was the lack of friendships that he had.” The theme of community was also shared by Parents 5 and 6, describing an older couple who volunteers on Friday evenings with students. Because of this strong community, parents in the focus group talked about the genuine friendships that have blossomed with students. Parent 7 shared that her son is talking to students on the phone, even though he has graduated from the program, having students take him out for movies and dinners because they want to spend time with her son. Her inclusion philosophy was supported by her son’s enrollment in the program.

For students to access the community, Beyond Limits, Bethel BUILD, and MICC have put together the right supports to allow students to grow and be more independent. In illustrating this point, Parent 8 said, “Life skills that he's developed and friendships and all the things that I value from MICC.” Parent 8 went on to provide an example about apartment circles to help students set rules for their living space and resolve a disagreement, “...they're setting their rules together. What do we want our apartment to look like? Who's allowed in, and who's not? What are our values? This was an aspect that I really appreciated.” Having that teaching embedded has helped his son to grow his skills. Parents 5 & 6 discussed the social structure available at Beyond Limits that allows their son access to social activities. The support of RA’s, course work, and teachers have helped students grow in ways the parents shared they always knew their

children could. All parents in Focus Group 2 described that while it is scary, letting their students go into these programs has allowed them to develop in ways they could not have developed if they had stayed at home. Parent 7 summarized this concept:

Many of those things have to be released to the program to the staff and the system. You have to trust the system... He doesn't have very clear speech, and some people have a hard time understanding...Through consistent, compassionate communication partners...his communication skills really grew because he had to. He had to make himself understood to a broader audience...That's because of all the experiences he's had and all the partners he's spoken with... that has helped shape his skills.

While that was a priority outcome for all parents, they all described being surprised in just how fast and how much growth occurred.

Real-life skills and increased independence are themes that occurred throughout the duration of the focus group. Parent 8 described how he had worked on getting his son a part-time job at several well-known locations that have traditionally accepted a diverse workgroup. While he knew his son had the ability to perform the job tasks, he was met with resistance due to the communication skills needed to conduct an interview,

I saw young people with special needs working at Lund's, so obviously they must hire people like that...They won't even listen to you, and you won't even get through that first phone interview.... Unless he's in a program and has support... That was a real surprise and shock for me.

Most employers work with external programs to match jobs to students enrolled in their respective programs. Parent 8 learned that another benefit of joining MICC was their ability to



help his son access the workforce in a way that he could not help with as a parent. Various life skills were learned, developed, and tweaked during programming. For example, Parent 7 described time management of getting to the dining hall during proper hours, and Parent 8 discussed that personal hygiene has improved since he moved out. All parents described increased communication skills as an unexpected outcome of the transition program, but one that will serve their child well beyond their time in transition. The real-life experiences students engage in through transition programs are the primary outcomes parents are looking for. Parent 8 said, “the idea of independence, on some level, on the life skills part” was a central outcome to the programming they were looking for. Living with a roommate, laundry, real-life communication, transportation skills, and functional adult living skills were explained in answers to questions in the focus group regarding outcomes they were looking for in a residential transition program.

Another outcome shared by all parents in this focus group was their child’s desire to attend a college-type program. Parent 7 summarized this, “[My son] was really motivated. After transition, he was really motivated to go to college. I want him to be able to set some goals for himself and support him in meeting those goals.” Parents 5, 6, 7, and 8 shared their strong desire to follow their child’s lead in supporting what independent life could look like for them. Parent 8 said:

I wanted him to be a respectful, responsible, kind, loving adult who loved what he was doing. That was our goal, and that still is. To that end, no matter what happens, he is a success in my mind. Of course, how do you get them to a sustainable, independent situation where he can manage on his own? Plus, he has his own dreams and aspirations.

Parent 7 described the process of selecting programs as being open to opportunities in their journey. In doing this along with listening to their child's desires for an experience, they were able to work with their team to find the right programs. Parent 8 shared that his son's barriers through the employment practice helped him advocate. Additionally, all parents shared that being brave enough to let go and place their students in situations, like the programs they have enrolled in, has allowed the high expectations and supported teaching to provide them the environment to flourish.

Participants in Focus Group 2 also shared that being an advocate, listening to what their child wanted and needed, staying true to their philosophy, and collaborating helped to support them in understanding what outcomes were important to them and their children. "We're all advocates, but we all come with varying levels of expertise and skill and comfort level, and all of the tasks that advocacy takes," said Parent 7. Parent 8 shared that when he met his son's roommates, he felt like he had found a place that understood his son and his needs. They were all so similar that the staff could understand what they needed to succeed. Ultimately, parents wanted growth and inclusion opportunities for their children. Still, they were surprised with the growth when they let go of being the primary caretaker, advocating for their child, and allowed them to have additional responsibility.

### **Focus Group 2- Research Question 2.**

**RQ2.** How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child in?

Research question two looked into how parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child in. Participants in Focus Group 2 unanimously shared that they followed the lead from their child and focused on programs that fit their child's needs

and skills. Parents 5 and 6 spoke to the feedback they received along the way from their son's team,

...elicit feedback.... [Our son] tried to get into the internship program, and he didn't get in. But the woman there ...gave us great feedback. We took it to the school, and it was a lot of the basis of his IEP for the next year.

This allowed him to be ready for the internship the following year. Parent 7 explained that her child didn't want to go to college immediately after attending the school district's transition program. Instead, he was interested two years later.

When he was ready, Parent 7 was able to facilitate the process of finding a program that matched his needs. Parent 8 described the process of figuring out an adult living situation and employment without any outside support. He received information about MICC from a patient of his sister. After looking into the program, he realized this would help him accomplish what he had been looking for on his own. Parent 7 described this process as a process of "discernment." She went on to say,

When you're interviewing, and you're exploring the different programs, you know this one turned out to be a good fit, and this one didn't. You never know what [my son] can do when he doesn't live with his parents when he lives with his parents."

All parents agreed that figuring out what is not a fit is just as important as figuring out what is a fit. Programming for families has to match personal philosophy and student goals. As parents reflected, they shared the journey to where they are now, which started years before. They acknowledged that decisions they had made through the process, individuals who supported them, and the knowledge they gained helped them make decisions to enroll at their respective programs.

All parents said they had a firm understanding of their child's needs, abilities, and desires. This helped them to be able to match the program outcomes and helped in the decision-making process. Parents 5 and 6 shared that they consistently followed their son's lead to help them make decisions and made sure to include him in the goal setting and planning, "We followed his ability path and then found the fit." Parent 8 discussed knowing what his son could do, which led him to find a program that allowed him to do that, especially with work—combining the power of advocacy and a firm understanding of what their children wanted and needed to be proven central to the decision-making process.

When going through the selection process, parents in Focus Group 2 talked about their philosophies regarding advocacy and programming. Parent 7 described her philosophy as an "inclusionist." She spoke of allowing access and using natural supports to grow skills. This philosophy helped guide her decision-making process and ultimately led to her son being enrolled at Bethel BUILD and Beyond Limits. Parent 8 reflected on learning of MICC's programming and knowing that the supports and structures would ensure his son's growth and independence. He described that having a staff that understood his child's needs and having other students who shared similar needs helped him know he had made the right choice. Likewise, parents 5 and 6 shared the nuances of the decision-making process in a split household, specifically school-related decisions. They explained that sometimes there was a difference in how they would get there, but by understanding their child's needs they were able to stay focused on next steps. Specifically, they shared, "A lot of that was because [our son] identified with the neuro normal kids. He didn't want to be with the kids like him, and so we used that as a motivator for him...For us, it was a building block of his abilities, and we just kept sort of working with that." Central to the focus for Parents 5 and 6 was ensuring they were

advocating, asking for feedback, and surrounding themselves with the right people. This focus supported decision-making for them throughout school and into transition programming.

Parents brought up the financial aspect of decision-making when talking about county supports. Parents 5, 6 and 7 shared that the county support made the decision to attend easier. Parent 7 noted that most families don't know this is an option and that the "sticker shock" can turn parents away. Parents that use county social workers can write applications for funding to help pay for residential transition programs. Working with these county providers helped families ensure that finances were not a barrier in the decision-making process.

Advocacy plays a vital role as parents make final selections and decisions for programming. Leveraging the support of a team was central to Focus Group 2 in how they navigated the decision-making process. Parents 5 and 6 talked about the IEP team who helped build skills for attending Beyond Limits. Parent 7 shared the importance of building a team to help get to the next step in the journey, whether through writing acceptance letters or supporting with paperwork. Building a team can be a challenge, as Parent 8 noted. He is currently using the support of the school and other parents to create an environment where his son can thrive.

Being in the right place at the right time has helped families learn about programming options. Parent 8 shared that his sister had met someone who knew of MICC. This connection helped him look into the program and ultimately led to enrollment. Parents 5 and 6 discussed learning of the Beyond Limits program through Young Life. They also watched videos online, and the stories they heard aided in the selection process. They said, "We went on their website, and we saw interviews of students that had gone through the program...the way they talked about what they experienced really turned us towards that could really be a potential program for [our son]". They also mentioned the religious aspect of Beyond Limits being a draw for them.

They trusted the environment to be safe and supportive for their son. Parent 8 did research and was well connected in the industry. Her involvement professionally allowed her access to support and guidance from individuals at the Minnesota Department of Education. Parent 8 shared that this gave her insight and direction that validated her thinking around programming.

Ultimately, parents in Focus Group 2 shared that the most surprising feature in programming was what their child was capable of when they were not around to manage. Parent 5 and 6 said:

Part of the reason we're really glad about getting into this program is that whole sense of finding out how much we've enabled him. Letting go because there's a ton of stuff that we knew that we did, more than he was capable of doing more.

Letting go, was and still is, difficult for parents. All parents commented that they would tell other parents to engage in the art of letting go. When students are placed in more independent and inclusive environments, they rise to the occasion, improve skills, and find ways to support themselves and their communication. Parents agreed that high expectations in natural environments, away from their parents, are the best option for students to develop their full potential.

### **Focus Group Three**

#### **Participants.**

Table 3

#### *Focus Group Three Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Transition Program	Year of Student in Program
Parent 9	Bethany Beyond Limits	1 <sup>st</sup> year
Parent 10	Bethany Beyond Limits	2 <sup>nd</sup> year

Parent 9 has a son in his first year at the Bethany Beyond Limits program. Parent 9 heard about the Beyond Limits program from being involved in the Young Life program. With the help of their county social worker, they were able to fund and enroll in the program. Although they were worried about how their son would do independently, they have been excited about his growth and increase in independent skills in the last six months. While they are nervous about the next steps after the program, they enjoy the moments and celebrate his growth and happiness.

Parent 10's daughter is in her second year in the Bethany Beyond Limits program. Initially, she had tried to get into the Bethel BUILD program but didn't get in due to scoring too high on the IQ portion of the entrance requirement, which is required for the program. Bethel suggested that they look into the Beyond Limits program. Parent 10 was looking to increase their daughter's social skills and knew that allowing her to develop those skills in an inclusive environment would be the best for fit.

## **Analysis**

### **Focus Group 3- Research Question 1.**

**RQ1.** What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs?

Living in an environment that allows students with disabilities to interact with peers in an authentic and meaningful way continued to be the main draw and an essential outcome of the program for parents in Focus Group 3. Parent 10 says, "Bethany just opened up the doors to have an experience of living with a roommate and being surrounded by people and working on what is most critical for [our daughter], which is her social skills." Building skills in a natural environment is critical to having typical peer role models. Additionally, parents in this focus group shared that having the opportunity to communicate and interact with same-age peers in a

safe college environment is a unique opportunity that could not be replicated in a program designed for only students with disabilities. Again, Parent 10 states, “Integrating with other students...what a unique opportunity to hang out with college kids. It [has] been about making friends and building relationships.” Having the space to build a community with same-age counterparts has proven to be an invaluable outcome.

Beyond the community that has been built, students are outperforming the expectations their parents had for them. They credit the high expectations of the environment for this success. Parent 9 said, “It has gone better than we could have imagined... They have a lot of autonomy there. [Our son] likes having freedom, but with support.” Parent 9 was worried that they would have to pick up their son the first week, but he continues to make progress and enjoy the community. They describe the Beyond Limits program as having the right kind of embedded support to ensure the students’ needs are being met while allowing them to grow in their ability to be more independent.

Parents in this focus group were clear about the goals that factored into program outcomes they were looking for within a transition program. Parents shared that the goals that matched their child’s needs were present in their selected programs. For example, Parent 10 was looking for a placement that supported employment skills alongside the social skills that characteristically defined her daughter’s disability. “Now that HS is over, we were hoping to have some sort of employment. We wanted to find something that [our daughter] was interested in... and find a program that would accept a child with autism.”

Increasing student independence was a central outcome and theme for the parents in this focus group. Letting their children experience this in a natural environment allowed students to grow skills beyond what could be taught at home. Parent 9 said,



For us, the journey is how far he can go. What can he do on his own? How much independence can he have? The one thing we have learned in this semester is that he is more independent than we gave him credit for.

This small glimpse of growth in independence has allowed parents to think about longer-term independence, which provides a life of security. Parent 10 summarizes this, “I am sure this [is] universal for all parents, but especially with parents with special needs, is what happens when we are gone? Trying to get her as independent as possible in as many areas as possible.” Independence and self-sufficiency have lasting impacts on students, increasing quality of life and reducing reliance on others. One unexpected outcome of their child’s greater independence has been improved time with their spouse since their focus is not completely on their child with a disability. Parents 9 and 10 talked about taking time to slow down and talk with their spouses in a way they had not been able to do for many years. While this was not an outcome that was a driving factor in selecting a program, participants shared that this has been a nice perk they did not expect. Having their child well cared for in a safe place has opened up the door and changed parents’ thinking about future living options away from home to continue this growth.

The outcomes and goals that Parents 9 and 10 identified before starting the Beyond Limits program have changed and evolved. Parent 9 shared, “Finding a job, figuring out a place to live...If there is something out there that would be a good fit”, were goals that have evolved with the skills that have been developed. Now they are thinking globally about searching for options to support a similar experience to what they have at Beyond Limits. Parent 10 is further along in this journey and said, “Both independent living and potential jobs possibilities have changed dramatically.” Students are also enjoying their independent placement more than they thought they would. “He lives on campus, and it is going so much better than we could have

ever imagined. He never wants to move back home. He loves it and doesn't ever want it to end." Students' goals change and evolve as they learn more in natural settings like Beyond Limits and parents are open to the options that directly relate to a different and more independent outcome for their child's adult life.

Parents in this focus group also highlighted the importance of allowing their child the opportunity at independence to reach their full potential. Parent 9 said, "We know our children best, and sometimes we impose limits that we don't realize. Sometimes it takes that extra set of eyes to know that there is more potential and that they can be pushed in that direction." Programs like Beyond Limits provide an environment that fosters that independence and growth. Likewise, Parent 10 summarized it when she talked about the importance of programs that allowed integration between all students. "These programs are little hidden gems that many people don't know about. We need more programs like this."

### **Focus Group 3- Research Question 2.**

**RQ2.** How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child in?

Deciding to enroll in a residential transition program means weighing goals, options, and finances. Parents in Focus Group 3 said that honoring their child's desires, outcomes, and goals was central to the decision-making process. "It was really...about having that social experience and not being only socialized with parents and siblings." Parents 9 and 10 shared that their respective children discussed going to college and desired to complete a program like their peers of the same age. Parent 10 stated, "Bethany just opened up the doors to have an experience of living with a roommate and being surrounded by people and working on what is most

critical...which is her social skills.” Being transparent and understanding student goals and needs helped parents find a program that fit their students.

The program’s environment was an essential factor in the decision-making process. Parents wanted their children to feel safe both physically and emotionally. The location of the Beyond Limits program felt safe to both families because it was in a residential area. Additionally, the Christian atmosphere was important for them. Knowing that other students shared Christian values equated to a feeling of security. According to Parent 10, “This was a very safe situation, especially at a Christian campus.” After a tour of the campus, Parent 9 similarly shared, “We know he is safe there....and felt that it was a good fit.” Parents want to feel a sense of safety and security when deciding on a program. Parents discussed needing to feel like the program is a good fit, which factored into the atmosphere and environment. Having heard about the program through a respected Young Life leader, Parent 9 said they trusted the personal recommendation. Likewise, Parent 10 said that she and her daughter left knowing it was a good fit when they drove down to do a tour.

This focus group discussed finances as a part of their decision-making, even if it wasn’t the primary factor. Financial support is inconsistent between state counties. Parent 9 had a very supportive social worker who helped secure funds through their county. This was different from Parent 10, who said they had to finance the program themselves, which was a huge burden for their family. This inconsistency with support can turn families away or be a stressor. Parent 10 said she had such poor experiences with the county that she would tell other parents to advocate for someone who could help them. Parent 9 agreed and shared that she felt “blessed” by her support.

### **Focus Group Themes**

Central themes emerged from each focus group to answer the research questions of this study. The following table indicates those themes and from which focus group they derived.

Table 4

*RQ1 Summary of Significant Themes*

**RQ1:** What outcomes do parents expect from transition programs that serve 18-21-year-old students with special needs?

Theme	Focus Group
Outcomes that match student needs and desires/fit of student	1, 2, 3
Inclusive & integrated community	1, 2, 3
Needs of the family	1
Realistic and hands-on environment	1, 2, 3
Support into adulthood	1, 2
High expectations and growth	1, 2, 3

Table 5

*RQ2 Summary of Significant Themes*

**RQ2:** How do parents make decisions regarding which transition program to enroll their child in?

Theme	Focus Group
Student feedback and voice	1, 2, 3
Safety and security	1, 3
Fit for student’s academic and functional skills	1, 2, 3
Ruling out of programs that are not a fit	1, 2, 3
County support	1, 2, 3
Feedback from previous teams	2
Word of mouth/personal endorsements	2, 3
Christian Environment	2, 3
Personal beliefs	2

Several prominent themes were consistent across focus groups. Parents bring in various backgrounds and individual experiences, which shape their responses. These similarities and differences are worth noting in the results.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, & Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn how parents select tuition-based transition programs. The study sought to understand what outcomes were important to parents as they decided to enroll their children in tuition-based transition programs. There are very few studies on how or why parents make this decision. The researcher worked to bring parent voices into the body of research to inform future research, enhance programming for students with disabilities, and better support families who need adult support for their children with disabilities.

Data for this study was collected through a series of three focus groups consisting of 10 total parents. Several themes emerged throughout the focus groups, allowing the researcher to determine that saturation had occurred among the groups interviewed. Additionally, unique and outlying perspectives were included to provide a rich data set and answer the research questions thoroughly.

### **Discussion**

Parents in this research study stated the importance of having a realistic experience for their child that matched their individual needs, overall family goals, and a place to apply and generalize skills. Parents were seeking programs that allowed their children to grow in their independence while prompting the development of skill sets typical of their same-aged peers. Several parents used the example of laundry to illustrate how this skill is more meaningful when expected within the residential environment. Hands-on learning in a realistic setting is the gold standard for any transition program (Trach, 2012). Applying learning to everyday experiences enhances the learning environment, supports more significant growth in students, and is the

desired outcome unique to tuition-based transition programs with a residential component.

Parents all shared that this experience could not be replicated within in-district programming for this reason.

While some parents wanted an inclusive setting for their children, others wanted a supported living environment where their son or daughter's disability was understood. Regardless, what remained was that the various residential transition programs in Minnesota supported the overall family and student goal of providing greater independence. Parents remarked on the skills gained after students enrolled in programs; providing an experience that emulates a realistic setting improves student outcomes after programming (Scott & Puglia, 2018). The natural environments supported greater communication and problem-solving skills, which are critical outcomes parents hope for when enrolling in these transition programs.

Self-advocacy and their own child's decision played a role to varying degrees with the families in this study. Almost all parents discussed how their child's self-advocacy increased throughout the program and in a very short time. This was a desired outcome for families. As far as the making the decision of which program to attend, several families worked to include their children in the decision-making process. For some, this meant the child had the sole choice, and for others, it meant making sure their child's perspectives and needs were at the forefront of the decision-making process.

Limited options are available for families to choose from, and placement support is limited. Schools and case managers are also limited in what they can suggest outside of district programming. Some parents found success in working with their county social workers, but in general, they state that they were mainly on their own to find programming that fit their child's needs. Because of this, they had to learn and advocate for what would be a good fit for both their

child and their family. Hirano et al. (2018), state that collaboration between agencies has a greater impact and benefit on the student, but there is still work to be done to ensure families have this support system while going through this process. Family goals and needs were a major contributing factor in the decision-making process. Varying life circumstances played into the types of programs that families were looking for after high school.

There is still a continued need for greater programming options after transition programs. Families referred to the time while their child is enrolled in the residential transition programs as the “glory years.” Families start to think about what will happen next early in the transition program. Opportunities for long term adult programs are limited or have long waitlists. While some programs have additional adult support built-in, like MICC, the other programs do not have support after the two years. The adult support MICC offered was an appealing selection for parents looking for more extended placements and continued adult support for more independent children.

Throughout the program selection process, parents indicate the journey included figuring out what did not work. Parents talked about district programming that was a poor fit, other transition programs that did not support their child in the way they needed to be supported, and general availability. As families went through this process, they described being overwhelmed, lonely, and misunderstood. Finding a fit that matched their child’s needs and family goals alleviated these emotions. By finding the correct program fit, students have better outcomes (Test & Cease-Cook, 2012).

An unexpected outcome that all parents in the focus groups expressed was the overall growth in independence and communication of their children. Being in an environment that supported and fostered a real-life living situation allowed students to rise to the occasion.



Parents reported their children having increased communication skills, more functional living skills, and a stronger community built for themselves. Parents consistently said the most challenging part, and the best part, was truly letting go and watching their child reach potential beyond what they had imagined.

## **Implications**

The results of this study are important to both transition programs as well as parents who are seeking residential transition programs for their students. This work helps ensure that institutions offering similar programming understand what parents are looking for and how they make these decisions. Likewise, other parents looking for residential transition programs can access this body of research to guide their decision-making. The intent of this research was to reach as many parents and schools as possible to help families and students in matching a program to their needs.

Additional inclusive residential transition programs should be created in order for more students can access experiences that were described in this study. Many families are willing to enroll their children in inclusive programs that allow for a hands-on living situation. This experience is critical to maximizing growth and helping students be as independent as possible. Parents are also looking for longer programs, or adult programs, that offer a similar inclusive residential experience. Parents said two years is too short, and planning for the following stages following completion of these programs needs to happen early in the process.

Finally, this study captured how and why families choose their programs they invest in. This information can support and inform current programs to refine their process and remove barriers to access. Doing so will allow more families access and enhance programming for students.

## **Future Research**

Continued work needs to be done to gather more parent voices about the process of choosing post-secondary options for their children with disabilities. While valid themes were collected in this study, it is essential to continue to expound on parents' journeys as they seek transitional program options for their adult children. Through this study, several other suggestions for continued research emerged.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of students after they complete their respective transition programs. Parents were clear about the options and desired outcomes that influenced their programming decisions. Following students over the course of their adult life could provide insights into whether those outcomes were achieved, and would also inform improvements in transitional programming and adult services. Additionally, this would help parents when deciding to enroll in programs. Having a more extensive data set available would also inform current transition programs of the desirability of their program outcomes and determine successful skill development for students.

Parent disclosure about how families pay for the programs featured in this study were inconsistent. While several participants could secure funding through county programs, the process to access those funds was not clearly published or easily obtained. Further research is needed around how parents are getting information about financial support and how information about program financing would help increase equitable access to program options for traditionally marginalized students and families with low incomes.

County social work support and high school IEP support were inconsistent among participants in this study. Families that had a team that understood the process, were willing to seek out the knowledge, and understood family goals, were the most successful in this process.

Those that did not have that support talked about the difficulties in navigating this process.

While there is a healthy body of research on inter-agency teaming, consideration needs to be given to the uniqueness of the programs outlined in this research. Families and programs alike would benefit from getting information to the hands of schools, IEP teams, and county social workers to decrease barriers for parents. Continued research in this area is deemed necessary.

Continuing research supports all, especially the students enrolling in programs. Lastly, considering how all entities (school, home, county, and the transition programs) can work together to benefit the student will yield the best results and outcomes for the students they serve.

## **Recommendations**

This research study discovered several important themes through focus group discussions. The following recommendations are for current transition programs, parents looking into transition programs, educators looking to inform their practice, and other researchers.

**Post program support.** One major recommendation that came from those themes is looking into long-term support and helping families develop post-program plans. Parents described the years when their child is enrolled in their transition as the “glory years” because they continue to thrive and flourish. Parents with students enrolled at Bethel BUILD and Beyond Limits are already starting to think about the following steps to continue a supported living experience that continues to grow independence. This differs from MICC, which has an adult program to support participants after completing the transition program. Participants at MICC said that was a significant draw to the program. It is worth noting that while finding participants for the focus group, a couple whose daughter has been in the adult program for over a decade. Since the couple’s qualifications fell outside of the research parameters, their data was not included in the primary research. However, they shared the importance of having support

after a program ended and its benefit for their daughter by being enrolled with continued support. Combined with research participants in the focus groups, these insights demonstrated the need for additional longitudinal studies for post-program needs. Programs that do not offer this type of support would benefit from having resources available for parents to look into so they can seek out options when their children complete their two-year residential programs. Likewise, they should start this early in the programming due to application processes and long waitlists. Having this layer of support built into their programs would enhance well-developed programs and close the loop for students and families.

**Interagency support.** Parents continue to receive inconsistent support from county services when it comes to matching students to these transition programs and often they do not receive information about how to get support with payment options for tuition-based programs. County services would benefit from ensuring their county caseworkers are informed about programs such as MICC, Bethel BUILD, and Beyond Limits to help their clients navigate post-secondary options. Furthermore, building a plan for financial assistance through county programs helped several parents in the focus groups pay for programs. Those who did not access this shared that they wished they had a better social worker or information to help them navigate this part of the process. Likewise, programs should bring parents information on payment opportunities and programs that support children with disabilities. Adding this level of support would remove access barriers for parents when navigating the financial responsibilities of a residential transition program.

**Parent expectations.** Every family interviewed discussed how much their child grew in independence once enrolled in one of these programs and how important it was to relinquish control to the transition program. As parents navigate the next steps for their child, they need to

trust the process, the staff, and the program to care for their child and teach them skills to grow their independence. Students are successful in these programs because of the high expectations but also because they are living independently and outside of the comfort of their parents' oversight. Learning in a hands-on environment develops student skills in ways that their families would have never imagined. As parents decide on enrollment, they must recognize and embrace this stage for their child, which will lead towards a maximum benefit from the program.

**Networking.** One way to help with this is to allow parents to build a better network. MICC, Bethel BUILD, and Beyond Limits would benefit from having parent groups. This would help interested families and current families learn from each other after the program. Having a network of invested parents, who represent a program of interest, helps spread the word about the program and could reassure parents who might be worried about what to do next in their child's journey. Parents often expressed loneliness and fear when they went through the selection process. This could be avoided if there were existing groups for parents to connect with other parents.

**Additional programs.** The creation of more programs, like the ones described in this study, is an important recommendation. Parents are looking for programs that allow their students with disabilities the opportunity to grow their independence within an inclusive community. These programs need to be affordable, safe, and well-staffed to produce the intended outcomes. Programs like MICC, Bethel BUILD, and Beyond Limits are well established and can serve as a model for new programs. Likewise, two of the three programs have a faith-based community embedded in their student body population. Regardless of families' faith background, parents noted that they knew the quality of an inclusive community was influenced by the Christian mission. They described peers who were friendly, kind, and

accepting. Although MICC is not a Christian school, they also provide a safe and welcoming environment where parents felt heard and understood in their journey. The overall feel of the environment is essential as parents make final selections of programming. Creating additional programs with similar settings would allow other students to access quality transition programming and work towards a life of more independence.

**Marketing.** Parents found these programs through trusted individuals who shared program information. A powerful marketing tool for these programs was word of mouth. Parents talked about speakers at youth groups, video testimonials, and discussions with previously enrolled families. This helped parents feel validated in their decision-making. Programs should focus on marketing and recruiting to aid in supporting parent decisions. Additionally, the work between the schools to support other programs was noted in the study. When one student was not a fit for a program, another program was suggested. This commitment to students was noticed by families and continues to be a message shared with other parents in similar places.

### **Potential Biases**

Potential bias exists in all research studies. In this research study, there was potential bias from the researcher's background and experience as a case manager and educator in a public K-12 school district, and current leadership as a director of special education. While the researcher did everything possible to reduce their biases through the process, it should be noted that these experiences play into the interpretation of results.

Other possible biases and unknown factors are the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. School experiences were different for educators and families during this time. It is essential to

consider the decision-making process for parents during the pandemic versus families who made this decision outside of the pandemic.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was using the Zoom platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not conducting the focus group in person meant that regular at-home distractions were present (e.g.: pets, as well as other people at home, and in the background). These interruptions could have influenced focus of participants when answering questions. Another limitation was the size of the study. Twelve people participated in this study. This small data pool means that several voices and perspectives were not present. Additionally, data from this study was limited to Minnesota-based programs.

### **Conclusion**

While additional research needs to be done, several major conclusions were drawn from this study. Parents are keenly aware of their child's needs. Finding a program that matches those needs is a top priority as they select a tuition-based transition program. Additionally, parents have spent time listening to what their child wants to do and where they want to go. Parents support their children's goals and find placements that will do the same. In general, parents are looking for hands-on experiences in a natural environment. Of the programs in Minnesota, two offer inclusion experiences where the transition program is housed in a campus with neurotypical peers. For parents who believe strongly in inclusion, this was another top priority. For participants in MICC, parents felt heard, understood, and at ease that someone accepted and understood their child. Inclusion needs were met at MICC differently than at Bethel BUILD and Beyond Limits. Finally, the overall student growth in independence that

parents report has been a surprise outcome to parents. This growth is essential in building student independence, and is a vital outcome parents are looking for in a program.

Several factors play into the parents deciding to enroll in a transition program. Finances, availability, fit, safety, and overall feel were important to parents. In general, parents worked with their children to decide on a program that met the needs of everyone. Some families worked with county case managers or an IEP team but were mainly left to figure out details independently. A key takeaway for parents in the decision-making process was figuring out what did not work and what was not a fit. This proved to be just as crucial in the process as finding a program that did fit. Parents in this study feel empowered and optimistic in their choices and are champions for MICC, Bethel BUILD, and Beyond Limits. The parents in this study provided important data that will be helpful to future families as well as to the programs themselves; and while more research still needs to be done, this study provided impactful data and recommendations for those programs that will help families and students be successful.



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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent

#### **Consent Form for Level 1 Research with Humans**

You are invited to participate in a study of learning how parents select tuition-based transition programs. I hope to learn why parents select programs and what is important to families who select these programs. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you made this decision for your child and can provide answers to these important research questions. This research is being completed in fulfillment of a dissertation as a part of the Ed.D program at Bethel University.

If you decide to participate, I (Mandy Kasowicz) will be conducting focus groups to answer the question as to why and how parents select tuition-based transition programs. Focus groups will consist of four to six participants and will last approximately 90 minutes. Given the global pandemic, focus groups will be conducted on the Zoom platform. Participants' answers will contribute to a greater body of academic research and assist programs in supporting families with children with disabilities. This research can help programs determine how to support parents in the process of making the decision or how to access transition-related programming.

No identifiable information will be disclosed during the research process. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only aggregate data will be presented. The focus group will be recorded for later data analysis. Names in the transcription of the focus group members will be changed to protect confidentiality. All recordings and identifying information will be destroyed after the final data analysis. Data from the focus group will be a part of the final published dissertation.

**Confidentiality Risk:** Due to the nature of a focus group, participants in the group will hear the responses of other participants. By participating in this group, you are asked to keep responses that you hear from other participants confidential. When signing this consent you are agreeing to keep responses and discussions within the focus group confidential. By signing this consent form you are also indicating that you understand that the researcher cannot completely guarantee that other participants will keep your responses confidential, once the focus group is over.

**Risk of Sharing Sensitive Information:** Because of the nature of the questions being asked, it is possible that some questions may be experienced as uncomfortable or distressing. If a question prompts such a response, you may elect to not answer the question, answer in a private follow-up setting with only the researcher, or withdraw from the focus group. Every participant will be asked to sign this consent form prior to participating in the study .

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationship with Bethel University, Bethel BUILD Program, Minnesota Independence College and Community or Beyond Limits College in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting such relationships.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participants' rights or wish to report a research-related injury, please call Mandy Kasowicz (763-957-0393), Dr. Mike Lindstrom (612-209-1739), and Dr. Peter Jankowski (651-638-6901).

This consent form will be distributed and signed electronically. Please return a signed copy of this form, prior to the focus group, to: [mak42968@bethel.edu](mailto:mak42968@bethel.edu). A digital copy should be retained for your records.

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You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study

Signature of Participant	Date
Signature of Investigator	Date



## Appendix B

### Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Tell us about your child and their transition goals.
2. How did these goals influence your planning for post-high school?
3. Why did you select the program you did over other programs?
4. How did you feel throughout the selection process?
5. How did you go through the decision-making process of selecting a program to match your child's needs?
6. Knowing public school districts are required to provide transition programming until the age of 21, why did you consider paying for programming instead of staying in the free programming?
7. What help or support did you have to decide to enroll in the transition program selected?
8. What features of the program you enrolled in were important to you and your family?
9. How did those features match you and your child's transition goals?
10. How did the transition program you selected to match your child's goals?
11. How did your goals and priorities change over the course of your programming?
12. What advice would you have for a parent on a similar path as you?
13. In what ways did the program meet your family goals? What specific outcomes would you cite?
14. How did your child feel to be a part of a transition program like this?