

# Addressing the Needs of Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Considerations and Complexities for High School Interventions

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Equipping students with disabilities for postsecondary education and meaningful employment stands as a central purpose of special education and transition services. As students served within special education under the autism label graduate, however, many leave school without the skills, experiences, supports, and connections that will prepare them well for college and future careers. Reflection on these post-school outcomes is driving researchers to consider how secondary and transition services might be better designed and delivered to meet the needs of these adolescents.

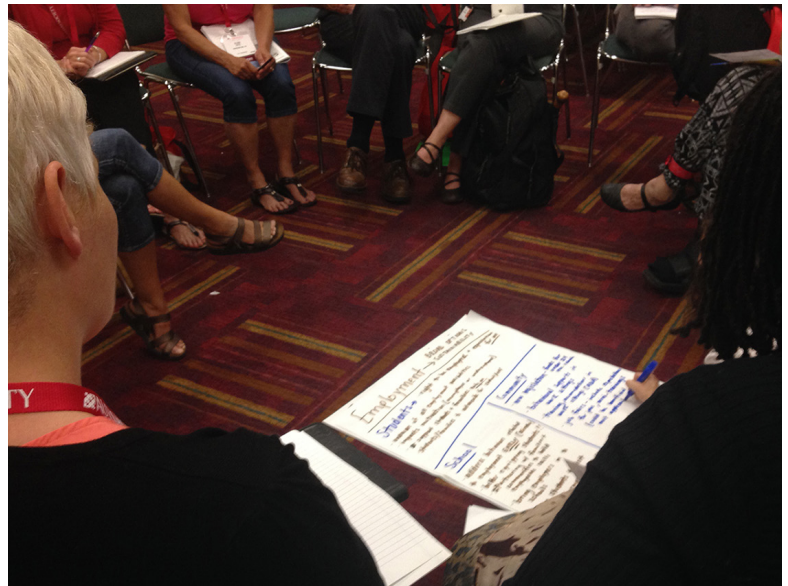
Although social-related challenges are among the defining features of ASD, the needs of adolescents with ASD often extend well beyond the social domain and can include academic, behavioral, and especially development of independent functioning as these students prepare to pursue goals in the areas of postsecondary education, careers, community participation, and independent living.

The Center on Secondary Education for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder (CSESA) is a 5-year project funded to develop, refine, and rigorously evaluate a comprehensive intervention package aimed at improving the in- and post-school outcomes for youth with ASD. Our model combines five individual intervention components (i.e.,

evidence-based foundations, peers and social competence, academics, transition and families, and adaptive behavior), each of which has strong initial research support but has not typically been delivered in tandem with the others.

In the first phase of our project, we developed initial variations of each of these components. Next, we solicited feedback from critical stakeholders (parents, educators, students, administrators) on the acceptability, feasibility, design, and anticipated impact of these interventions.

To do this we conducted 28 focus groups across four states to explore the contexts, considerations, and complexities associated with delivering evidence-based interventions to meet the needs of adolescents with ASD from the perspectives of 152 practitioners, parents, and other key stakeholders. In summary, we provide five key recommendations.



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## Recommendations:

1. Concerted and coordinated intervention efforts are sorely needed within secondary schools.

Currently, educators are in need of a strong, research-based foundation upon which to guide their intervention decisions to address the needs of teens and young adults with ASD.

2. Finding time for professionals, families, and students to collaborate around programming is a challenge at the high school level and creative solutions are required.

The sheer number of different individuals whose involvement (or support) is needed to address each intervention component across multiple settings was described as daunting, reinforcing the importance of efforts aimed at ensuring all of these stakeholders are equipped with the commitment, skills, and strategies needed to be involved effectively in the process.

3. It is essential that interventions be tailored to address the diverse and individualized needs of students across the entire spectrum.

There are many diverse needs of students with ASD served in high school settings. To meaningfully align interventions with the needs of individual students, educators need access to high-quality assessments and effective planning processes.

4. Strong professional development, training, and resources must be delivered in creative and compelling ways to ensure practitioners are well prepared to meet the educational and transition needs of high school students with ASD.

High-quality professional development is needed in both pre-service and in-service contexts. Such training must extend beyond single-day workshops and one-shot trainings that have little lasting impact on the frequency and quality of intervention implementation.

5. Targeted professional development should also be accompanied by broader efforts to ensure a basic awareness and understanding of ASD permeates secondary schools.

Although numerous studies have examined avenues for improving attitudes and awareness of various disabilities, research is inconclusive on the most effective approaches for achieving these aims.

We plan to continue capturing and drawing upon stakeholder feedback throughout our research project to inform policy and practice decisions related to the adoption of comprehensive interventions. The perspectives of these 152 stakeholders further reinforce both the importance—and challenges—of integrating multiple interventions in schools. In the remaining years of this project, we will be implementing and evaluating a comprehensive model that addresses all five intervention areas concurrently, each area having been refined and strengthened based on lessons learned from both our stakeholder interviews and pilot efforts.

### Full Article

Kucharczyk, S., Reutebuch, C. K., Carter, E. W., Hedges, S., El Zein, F., Fan, H., & Gustafson, J. R. (2015). Addressing the needs of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder: Considerations and complexities for high school interventions. *Exceptional Children*, 81(3), 329-349. doi: 10.1177/0014402914563703 <http://ecx.sagepub.com/content/81/3/329.full.pdf>

### Read more

Snapshots 72–77 provide brief synopses of articles from the special issue on “Autism, Adolescence, and High School” for Remedial and Special Education. Kara Hume, the issue’s guest editor, serves as co- principal investigator of FPG’s Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

#### Access Snapshots 72-77

<http://fpg.unc.edu/resources/snapshots>

**The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder** is a partnership between FPG and six universities: University of Wisconsin, University of California at Davis, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Vanderbilt University, University of Texas at Austin, and San Diego State University.

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