

GRAB AND GO PRACTICES

Ensuring Effective Staffing of Educational Coaches in College-Based Transition Services: Challenges and Solutions

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ISSUE NO. 18 • 2025

Since 2007, college-based transition services (CBTS) have been implemented in Massachusetts to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) aged 18–22. This inclusive postsecondary education model serves students whose Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams have determined they are eligible for school to adulthood transition services. Instead of receiving these services in high school, students engage in college life by participating in advising and career planning, enrolling in courses, accessing academic accommodations, joining campus clubs and activities, and working. They also develop independent travel skills by learning to navigate public transportation to and around campus.

Partnering school districts provide in-kind support by assigning staff to assist students in key areas, including using public transportation, navigating campus, attending college courses, requesting and using academic accommodations, and developing executive functioning and study skills in a college setting.

Providing educational coaches is a critical support for students engaged in CBTS. It is essential to recognize the challenges of providing coaches and the efforts of school partner' to address these challenges.

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CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Challenges and solutions have emerged from discussions with school and college partners about educational coach staffing. In this Grab and Go Practices brief, we outline these challenges, examine their implications, and highlight solutions developed by staff partners from both the colleges and the schools. These challenges include:

- » early budgeting for educational coaches
- » addressing union and job description requirements
- » recruitment
- » maintaining appropriate staff-to-student ratios
- » ensuring effective training and supervision

Budgeting for Educational Coaches

School partners have traditionally provided students with educational coaches to support their participation in college-based transition services (CBTS). Special education directors often assign staff from their existing pool of paraprofessionals. However, this can affect student-staff ratios in classrooms or community settings, where paraprofessionals are also needed to support work-based learning activities.

To address this, special education administrators recommend considering staffing needs early in the budgeting cycle. This proactive approach ensures that students receive the necessary support in CBTS for the upcoming school year. Additionally, planning for a pool of substitute paraprofessionals can help minimize disruptions to student schedules, particularly in community-based settings.



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Addressing Union and Job Description Requirements

The responsibilities of an educational coach differ significantly from those of a typical paraprofessional. School-based paraprofessionals primarily work in classroom settings under a teacher's direction, following a standard school schedule (e.g., 7:30 AM–1:30 PM or 8:00 AM–2:00 PM) and adhering to the same vacation calendar as students and teachers. Even when supporting older students with disabilities in community-based instruction, their hours remain within the traditional school day.

In contrast, educational coaches support students in college courses on a campus setting. Instead of working under a classroom teacher, they are supervised by a college program coordinator. Their schedules align with the students they support, which may include travel training before arriving on campus or varying start and end times based on class schedules. Unlike paraprofessionals, educational coaches follow the college's academic calendar, which typically includes only one spring break.

To address these differences, school administrators have implemented several strategies:

1. **Developing an Accurate Job Description:** Collaborating with the school's human resources department and teacher union representatives to create a job description that reflects an educational coach's distinct responsibilities and hours.
2. **Classifying the Position Appropriately:** Working with the special education department, principal, union, and school committee to establish proper job classification and pay rates that align with these unique responsibilities.
3. **Reallocating Resources:** Creating separate positions for school-based and community-based work to meet the needs of students better while ensuring staff roles are clearly defined.

4. **Provide Compensatory Time:** Work with districts to provide compensatory time for the loss of February/April break and extended school days. Most campus programs end in the middle of May, and coaches can regain the extra hours and days worked on campus by providing compensatory time during May and June.

These steps help ensure that the educational coach role is accurately represented and effectively supported within school and district structures.

Hiring Strategies

School and college partners often collaborate to discuss strategies for recruiting candidates to fill educational coach positions. These strategies aim to identify people with experience supporting students with disabilities, some familiarity with college activities, the ability to work a flexible schedule, and a commitment to fostering student self-determination.

School Recruitment

School staff typically begin recruitment by assessing interest among paraprofessional team members, seeking those eager to support students on a college campus and open to a flexible work schedule. Occasionally, school staff may also recruit recently retired colleagues who wish to stay involved in education but on a part-time basis. School programs sometimes partner with local community providers to hire educational coaches, which can offer advantages over relying solely on school staff. Community providers can hire staff who can work outside traditional school hours, allowing for greater flexibility in supporting students. Another option some school partners explore is creating educational coach-sharing agreements between schools. In this case, districts share a coach, with the college liaison coordinating student schedules to facilitate this arrangement. Typically, a coach supports two students attending on alternating days. Funding is managed between the two districts, either through a 50/50 split or by one district hiring the coach and billing the other for their share.

College Recruitment

College partners often hire their own educational coaches, typically selecting graduate students or local community members. This approach offers flexibility, allowing coaches to support students on campus during non-traditional hours.

Another recruitment option is providing graduate assistantships. Graduate students receive tuition remission for up to nine credit hours and can work up to 19 hours per week. Districts who hire a graduate assistant are billed for tuition and hourly services, making this an attractive option since they do not directly manage the position.

Some school partners report an ongoing issue in which school-sponsored educational coaches may be assigned responsibilities that require union review. These differences include campus-based duties, non-traditional breaks, varying work hours, and sometimes different compensation from their school-based colleagues. To prevent staff concerns, engaging early with union representatives and human resources personnel is essential.

Maintaining Staff-to-Student Ratios

One challenge identified by school partners is maintaining appropriate staff-to-student ratios, particularly when they are involved in CBTS. Even when receiving education separate from high school programs, transition-age students may engage in various activities across college, the community, and sometimes even at the high school. This range of locations and activities can make staff scheduling difficult for school administrators.

School partners who focus on gradually reducing student support (“fading support”) report that this approach significantly eases the challenge of managing high student-to-staff ratios across multiple settings. Fading plans typically aim to decrease direct staff involvement while promoting natural supports, such as classmate assistance or technology-based aids (e.g., phone alarms, digital reminders of schedules). School partners review and discuss these support strategies during IEP meetings and parent sessions to prepare families for CBTS.

Establishing clear agreements on training and supervision is crucial before the coach begins work with students

Training and Supervision

The role of an educational coach is unique, so it is essential that they receive proper training and ongoing support. While college program staff often provide this training and supervision, the specifics are not always clearly outlined between partners.

Establishing clear agreements on training and supervision is crucial before the coach begins working with students.

Typical training topics for educational coaches include:

- » Understanding the differences between high school and college environments
- » Supporting students in requesting and using college accommodations
- » Preparing students to establish communication strategies with college instructors
- » Navigating and using learning management systems
- » Supporting students to succeed in college courses
- » Encouraging student participation in campus activities
- » Helping students develop social networks and facilitate friendships
- » Understanding disabilities and strategies to support students with autism and intellectual disabilities
- » Understanding the differences of the role of the coach in an academic setting, social settings, and in internships
- » Moving from dependence to independence; “letting go”

CONCLUSION

Educational coaches are essential in supporting students with IDD as they navigate CBTS. However, staffing these positions comes with unique challenges related to budgeting, job classification, recruitment, staff-to-student ratios, and training. By proactively addressing these issues—through early budgeting, union collaboration, strategic hiring, and well-defined training and supervision—school and college partners can ensure that students receive the support they need to succeed in an inclusive postsecondary environment. Implementing these solutions strengthens the sustainability of CBTS and enhances opportunities for students to develop independence, academic skills, and career readiness.

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GRAB AND GO PRACTICES, ISSUE NO. 18

The Center for Inclusive Higher Education and Transition is dedicated to advancing higher education and transition initiatives across Massachusetts. Our mission is to promote positive post-school outcomes for individuals with disabilities. We achieve this by offering professional development, training, and support to families, practitioners, advocates, and community partners.

Recommended citation for this publication:

Paiewonsky, M. & Lenahan, C. (2025). *Ensuring effective staffing of educational coaches in college-based transition services: Challenges and solutions*. The Massachusetts Center for Inclusive Higher Education and Transition Grab and Go Practices, Number 18. Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

