

# The Five “Knows” Every High School Graduate with a Disability Must Know

By Adam Rabasca



Of the 20.2 million graduates in 2015, approximately 200,000 have a learning disability; only 17% percent of the 200,000 access disability support services in college (Green, 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed in 2015 only 34% of students had obtained a bachelor’s degree, even as far as eight years within graduating from high school (Green, 2016). Still further, a study of 1,000 parents of children with intellectual disabilities shows only 15% of these children actually enroll in college within two years of completing high school (Wong, 2016).

At the risk of asking the obvious question, one must ask why?

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Perhaps, it is because of risk factors. Perhaps, institutional barriers to civil rights. Perhaps, simply, a lack of preparation on the disabled student’s behalf.

In *Executive Function in the Classroom* (2010), Dr. Christopher Kaufman writes,

Because the orbital regions of the PFC [prefrontal cortex of the brain] are not fully mature until the latest stages of adolescence in the early 20s, the portion of the brain most charged with the task of regulating the expression of strong emotions is not equipped to do so until children have already left the high school years behind. Therefore, K–12 teachers and school-based clinicians everywhere are working with a client base that is experiencing (and demonstrating) a mismatch of power between fully developed emotion-generation systems and only partially developed prefrontal control systems (40).

If the brain is not finished “growing” in children *without* disabilities until they are most likely graduating from college, what is the likelihood that a child *with* a disability can accomplish the same feat? Looking at the aforementioned statistics, not high.

Public schools are blamed. Parents are blamed. Colleges are blamed. The child is blamed. The child’s brain is blamed. For the purposes of this article, however, blame is useless. We, instead, need a solution.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all students in special education be provided transition planning prior to graduating from high school. Yet, statistics illustrate a rather bleak picture of post-secondary educational success. The solution, however, lies not solely within the child’s selection of the “right” school, but rather proactively developing, honing, and imprinting practical prior knowledge and targeted self-advocacy skills in advance of college enrollment.

In my 15 years as a special educator in public schools and special act private schools and now as a special education director, anecdotally speaking, I have seen more students fail to meet these common expectations and, if completing high school, even less complete college. The initiative to adequately prepare these students for the difficulties they face receives a lot of lip service, but little in the way of meaningful steps toward fully arming them with the necessary self-advocacy skills.

What, then, must a child with a disability be equipped with in order to be ready for post-secondary education? Keep reading...

***Know the law.*** Graduates with disabilities *must* understand that once high school is completed, IDEA is no longer applicable. They are now protected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (if a school receives public funding) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Both civil rights laws, the latter, in particular, ensures children with disabilities may not be denied access to the same education that other non-disabled children receive.

***Know the documentation.*** Graduates with disabilities often do not fully understand their own documentation of their disabilities. These are the psycho-educational evaluations, the neuropsychological evaluations, the IEP itself. If a child with a

disability does not *know* this documentation, then he or she cannot *explain* this documentation, and consequently cannot advocate for the accommodations and supports he or she needs.

***Know how to explain the documentation.*** Students with disabilities need a coach to practice the explanation of these documents through mock interviews and in some cases scripting. I like to prepare the students with whom I work a “proposed” Section 504 Accommodation Plan to present to the disability support center at their prospective colleges.

***Know the colleges.*** There are myriad lists of colleges with strong and well-respected support programs for students with disabilities and, for many, these will be the schools they attend. But, what if the graduate prefers a school not on these lists? They *must* know the supports available that the college offers.

***Know yourself.*** Above all, a graduate with a disability must know him- or herself. Know one’s strengths, weaknesses, preferred learning style, responses to differing educational stimuli. This requires coaching and training. This requires consultation. This requires guided introspection. Being prepared with self-awareness will leave the graduate only with the task of learning how to be a college student, just like all the others.

#### **References:**

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