NTACT THE COLLABORATIVE

Part 2: Putting It into Practice – Real-Life Uses of NTACT:C's Greatest Hits

An NTACT:C Webinar Presentation

August 21, 2025

Today's Webinar Will....

- → Explore how stakeholders are applying NTACT:C resources in real-world settings
- → Highlight practical strategies and cross-role collaboration
- → Share lessons learned and promising practices
- → Discuss how these approaches are making a difference in schools, VR offices, homes, and communities

Today's Presenters

→ **Christie Cyktor**
- Occupational therapist, researcher, & disability advocate
- Youth Training & Leadership Coordinator, PEAL Center

→ **Crystal Emery**
- 25+ years in secondary transition & early intervention
- State Systemic Improvement Plan Specialist, Utah State Board of Education

Today's Presenters – continued -1

→ **Lavinia Gripentrog**
- Secondary Transition Specialist, Utah State Board of Education
- Instructor, Utah State University

→ **Lupe Stevens**
- Program Director of Transitions, Nebraska VR
- 20+ years supporting students & young adults in VR

Today’s Presenters – continued -2

→ **Michele Williers**
- Executive Director, PEAK Parent Center
- 30+ years in leadership & advocacy for families and youth with disabilities

Application and Strategies: Special Education

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Utah Resources from NTACT:C

Lavinia Gripentrog & Crystal Emery

Utah State Board of Education

Intensive TA with NTACT:C

- Developed an intensive plan with short , intermediate and long-term outcomes
- Aligned our plan with our current work in Utah
- Monthly planning meeting
- Two onsite visits
- Coaching on data evaluation
- Support in the development of resources
- As needed check-ins with NTACT:C partners

NTACT:C Resources

- The YETI team led youth sessions and keynoted at our two-day transition institute
- YETI team supported our state's youth engagement efforts
- Predictors of Post School Success
- Predictors Implentation Self-Assessment (PISA)
- Local level Pre-Assessment Tool for transition teams
- Communities of Practice

Application and Strategies: Youth & Young Adults

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Using Youth Engagement Now (YEN) to Empower Young Leaders at PEAL

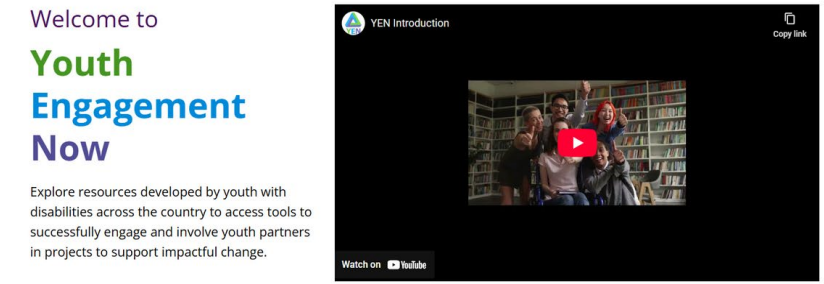
Christie Cyktor, OTD, MS, OTR/L
Youth Training and Leadership Coordinator - Western Pennsylvania

PEAL Mission

The mission of the PEAL Center is to educate and empower families to ensure that children, youth and young adults with disabilities and special health care needs lead rich, active lives as full members of their schools and communities.

What Is Youth Engagement Now (YEN)?

- Youth-developed resource hub hosted by NTACT:C
- Designed to help professionals and organizations foster authentic youth leadership
- Organized into three categories:
  - Foundations
  - Leadership
  - Collaboration
- Includes downloadable tools, reflection guides, templates, and facilitation materials



Foundations – Building the Groundwork

How PEAL Uses It: Works with new youth leaders and helps families understand the value of youth voice.

- Support youth leadership development by using the handouts in trainings and workshops to build confidence, self-awareness, and communication skills.
- Facilitate respectful and inclusive conversations by setting shared norms around language, boundaries, and asking questions about disability.
- Challenge myths and internalized ableism by helping youth and families reframe negative assumptions about disability and recognize strengths.
- Prepare youth for advocacy and public speaking with tools that clarify identity, boundaries, and how to articulate systemic barriers and lived experience.
- Guide discussions on language and identity using person-first vs. identity-first frameworks to respect individual preferences and promote self-determination.
- Educate staff, families, and partners on the social model of disability and how society, not diagnosis alone, creates barriers.
- Embed disability justice principles into programming by addressing invisible barriers, promoting access, and centering lived experience.

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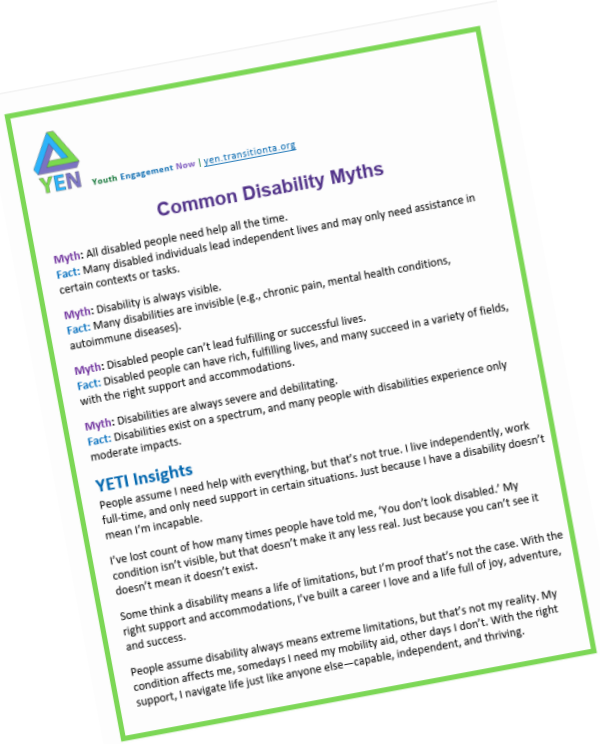

YEN Youth Engagement Now | yen.transitionta.org

Common Disability Myths

Myth: All disabled people need help all the time.
Fact: Many disabled individuals lead independent lives and may only need assistance in certain contexts or tasks.

Myth: Disability is always visible.
Fact: Many disabilities are invisible (e.g., chronic pain, mental health conditions, autoimmune diseases).

Myth: Disabled people can't lead fulfilling or successful lives.
Fact: Disabled people can have rich, fulfilling lives, and many succeed in a variety of fields, with the right support and accommodations.

Myth: Disabilities are always severe and debilitating.
Fact: Disabilities exist on a spectrum, and many people with disabilities experience only moderate impacts.

YETI Insights

People assume I need help with everything, but that's not true. I live independently, work full-time, and only need support in certain situations. Just because I have a disability doesn't mean I'm incapable.

I've lost count of how many times people have told me, 'You don't look disabled.' My condition isn't visible, but that doesn't make it any less real. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Some think a disability means a life of limitations, but I'm proof that's not the case. With the right support and accommodations, I've built a career I love and a life full of joy, adventure, and success.

People assume disability always means extreme limitations, but that's not my reality. My condition affects me, somedays I need my mobility aid, other days I don't. With the right support, I navigate life just like anyone else—capable, independent, and thriving.

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Person-First vs. Identity-First Language

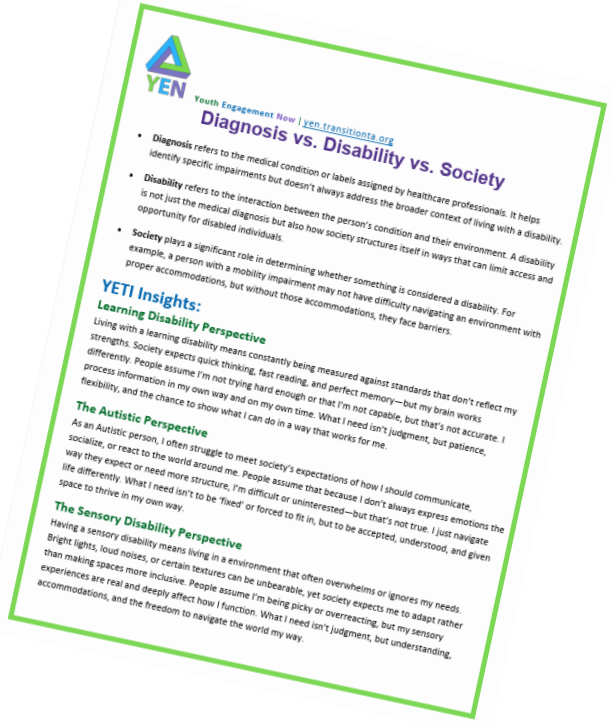
- Person-first language puts the person before their disability (e.g., "person with a disability" or "person with autism"). It emphasizes the individual rather than the condition.
- Identity-first language places the disability before the person (e.g., "disabled person" or "autistic person"). This perspective is often preferred by some disabled people as it aligns with their identity and does not imply that the disability is something separate from who they are.

Always ask individuals how they prefer to be addressed, as preferences vary by personality and situation

YETI Insights

Within YETI we have multiple people who use different language. **16 members** prefer person first, and **10 members** prefer identify first language.

"Be who you are fully, not just one aspect of yourself"



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Diagnosis vs. Disability vs. Society

- **Diagnosis** refers to the medical condition or labels assigned by healthcare professionals. It helps identify specific impairments but doesn't always address the broader context of living with a disability.
- **Disability** refers to the interaction between the person's condition and their environment. A disability is not just the medical diagnosis but also how society structures itself in ways that can limit access and opportunity for disabled individuals.
- **Society** plays a significant role in determining whether something is considered a disability. For example, a person with a mobility impairment may not have difficulty navigating an environment with proper accommodations, but without those accommodations, they face barriers.

YETI Insights:

Learning Disability Perspective

Living with a learning disability means constantly being measured against standards that don't reflect my strengths. Society expects quick thinking, fast reading, and perfect memory—but my brain works differently. People assume I'm not trying hard enough or that I'm not capable, but that's not accurate. I process information in my own way and on my own time. What I need isn't judgment, but patience, flexibility, and the chance to show what I can do in a way that works for me.

The Autistic Perspective

As an Autistic person, I often struggle to meet society's expectations of how I should communicate, socialize, or react to the world around me. People assume that because I don't always express emotions the way they expect or need more structure, I'm difficult or uninterested—but that's not true. I just navigate life differently. What I need isn't to be 'fixed' or forced to fit in, but to be accepted, understood, and given space to thrive in my own way.

The Sensory Disability Perspective

Having a sensory disability means living in a environment that often overwhelms or ignores my needs. Bright lights, loud noises, or certain textures can be unbearable, yet society expects me to adapt rather than making spaces more inclusive. People assume I'm being picky or overreacting, but my sensory experiences are real and deeply affect how I function. What I need isn't judgment, but understanding, accommodations, and the freedom to navigate the world my way.

Leadership – Nurturing Youth Power

How PEAL Uses It: Supports youth in shaping trainings, storytelling, and program planning.

- Guide personal storytelling for advocacy with the **Self-Advocacy Storytelling Toolkit and Power of Narrative slides;** used to prepare youth for public speaking, testimony, and media opportunities.
- Encourage reflection and systems thinking through the **Advocacy Reflection Journal**, helping youth connect personal experience to broader social change.
- Co-create accessible events and materials by embedding these tools into workshops, leadership events, and youth-led planning sessions.

SELF-ADVOCACY STORYTELLING TOOLKIT

A YETI Resource

WHY SHARING YOUR STORY MATTERS

- **Raises Awareness** – Personal stories make issues real and relatable for others, including policymakers, educators, and the public.
- **Inspires Change** – When decision-makers hear real experiences, they are more likely to take action on policies that affect people with disabilities.
- **Builds Confidence** – Sharing your story helps you develop self-advocacy skills and a strong sense of identity.
- **Connects with Others** – Your story can inspire and empower others facing similar challenges, creating a stronger community.

YEN

Youth Engagement Now

yen.transitionta.org

TIPS FOR CRAFTING YOUR STORY

- **Start with Who You Are** – Introduce yourself and share key parts of your identity (e.g., disability, interests, goals).
- **Describe Your Challenge or Barrier** – Explain a specific situation where you faced a challenge related to disability, accessibility, or inclusion.
- **Highlight What Helped or What You Did** – Share how you navigated the situation, what supports helped, or what changes you would like to see.
- **End with a Call to Action** – Encourage listeners to support a policy, change a practice, or take action in a meaningful way.
- **Keep it Clear and Concise** – Stick to key points and practice your story so it's easy to share in different settings.
- **Make it Personal, But Protect Yourself** –Share what feels comfortable.

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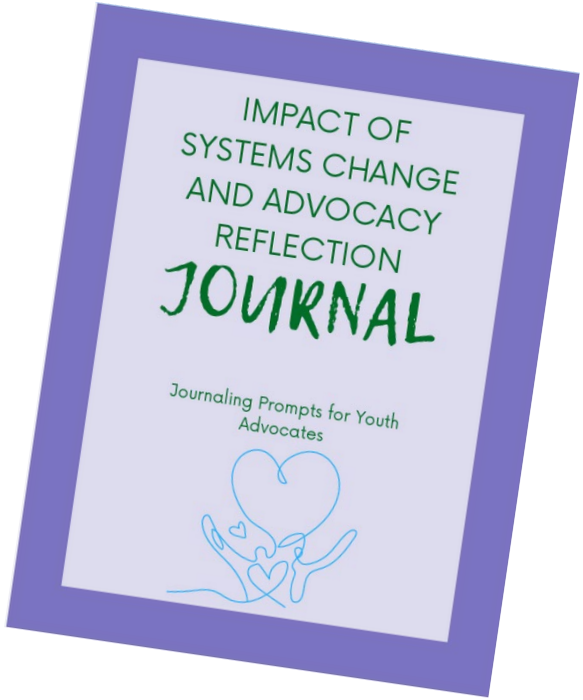

Collaboration – Working Together With Purpose

How PEAL Uses It: Designs youth–adult partnerships and co-led initiatives.

- **A Framework for Youth Teaming**
  - Helps me design meaningful youth-adult teams with clear purpose and structure. I use this to build intentional leadership teams, ensure proper mentorship, and avoid token inclusion.
- **Difficult Conversations Guidebook**
  - Equips youth and adult allies with strategies for handling tough conversations with respect and professionalism. I use it to prepare participants for advocacy, feedback sessions, and high-stakes interactions.
- **Using YEN Tools for System Change**
  - Guides users to apply YEN's resources strategically to support systemic advocacy and sustainable change. I use this when building campaigns or implementing new practices that address structural barriers.

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A Framework for Youth Teaming

This framework was developed to assist organizations in determining how to best recruit and actively team with youth. Review the topics and considerations with your team and develop a youth engagement action plan.

Use the solutions portion of the worksheet to identify ideas, solutions or action steps. You may find that you don't yet have an answer for every step. If that occurs, then you will have identified an area that you need assistance or support.

Steps	Description	Solutions
Purpose	Why do you want to involve youth in your work?	
Involvement	Create an action plan for why you want to include youth within the scope of your organization's mission. • Avoid tokenism, build a team of youth.	
Supports	Determine individuals within your	
Recruitr		

YEN Youth Engagement Now | yen.transitionta.org

YETI - Difficult Conversations

A guide for both youth and adult allies on handling difficult conversations professionally and productively, especially in advocacy settings where youth may face resistance or challenging feedback.

Learn strategies for staying professional and respectful in difficult conversations, and further your knowledge through the included question prompts and practice scenarios.

Top Tips from YETI

Preparing before a tough conversation or meeting

ivorite song to energize or calm yourself
thoughts or questions you want to ask that can help you feel prepared and get ready.
out how you are feeling. If you are dealing with tough life situations and feel it is ok to
someone know is an explanation, not an excuse.
there may be barriers or differences you can anticipate so you can be ready.
connector. Did this person DO something I like or am interested in. Find something good.
rsonal connection.

ribe a time when you had a difficult interaction? what did you do during that interaction and what was the outcome?

u build credibility and trust when advocating for a change that may be unpopular or met with resistance?

YEN Youth Engagement Now | yen.transitionta.org

The Importance of Fair Compensation

Introduction: Young adults with disabilities bring irreplicable lived experience, expertise and fresh perspectives to the table. Despite this, they are often asked to work for free or for minimal compensation. This practice is not only an inequity but also overlooks the significant contributions we can make. Fair compensation is imperative in creating an inclusive environment in which young people are valued and treated equitably.

Key Points:

Lived Experience as Expertise:

- Young adults with disabilities possess unique perspectives and skills derived from their lived experiences. These are often as valuable as formal qualifications and should be recognized as such.
- Lived experience is irreplaceable and contributes significantly to the success and authenticity of any project or initiative.

Why Fair Compensation Matters:

- Historically, people with disabilities have been economically disenfranchised and not offered easy access to economic opportunities, despite equally contributing our time, effort, and skills to society. Despite this, we still have bills to pay and families to feed like anyone else.
- Fair monetary compensation is the entry-level condition to creating a respectful and equitable environment. While experience and networking can be great benefits for young adults, non-monetary benefits like these should not be considered compensation alone.

YEN Youth Engagement Now | yen.transitionta.org

Using YEN Tools for System Change

The voices of youth leaders are often overlooked in system and policy-level discussions, yet their insights and experiences are vital to shaping a brighter future. As an adult ally, you have the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that young advocates are heard, valued, and empowered in these spaces. This is why its essential to ensure they have the preparation and mentorship to face these barriers.

Meeting with policymakers and change-makers can be intimidating, even for the most experienced advocates. That's why your role in preparing, supporting, and debriefing with youth leaders is essential. Whether a meeting goes as planned or presents unexpected challenges, your guidance can help young advocates gain confidence, refine their messaging, and grow from each experience. It will also help you set up your youth for success in navigating challenges in their journey.

To support you in this role, we have developed a set of tools designed to help youth leaders prepare for and reflect on these critical meetings. This section includes:

- **Discussion Questions** to help youth clarify their goals and anticipate key talking points.
- **Tips** on effective communication, self-advocacy, and navigating power dynamics in policy spaces.
- **Role-Playing Exercises** to help youth practice engaging with decision-makers in realistic scenarios.
- **Reflection Prompts** to encourage thoughtful analysis of each meeting, identify lessons learned, and refine future advocacy strategies.

We encourage you to use these tools not only to equip youth for individual meetings but also to foster their long-term growth and sustainability as advocates. Your support in this process will help ensure that youth leaders are not just present but fully engaged and influential in the conversations that shape their futures. It also helps you and youth be on the same page when a challenge arises in encounters with professionals. This helps youth feel supported and encouraged to advocate and learn to navigate through decision making, empowering their self-determination.

Thank you for your commitment to uplifting youth voices and supporting the next generation of change-makers.

Why YEN Works

The Impact of Youth-Led Resources

- Centered on lived experience
- Accessible, visual, and youth-approved
- Adaptable for virtual, hybrid, and in-person settings
- Encourages sustainability and growth, not one-time engagement

Next Steps

- Explore the website: **https://yen.transitionta.org**.
- Start with one section (Foundations, Leadership, or Collaboration).
- Share it with your youth board or advisory group.
- Reach out to PEAL if you want to co-present or collaborate!

Thank you!

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Application and Strategies: Vocational Rehabilitation

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Putting it into Practice

Nebraska VR

Identifying the problem

1. VR IPE outcomes have decreased for students that received Pre-Ets Services.
2. Case review findings show VR applications have decreased for students with disabilities.

State Plan: Increase applications and outcomes for SWD

1. Need for seamless transition from Pre-ETS to VR Services
2. Need to understand each other roles and policies
3. Need to understand the youth mindset

Solutions:

- **Provided training with the assistance of NTACT resources and webinars:**
    - Provide training to staff regarding how to keep youth engaged
        - Top 10 Tips for Youth Engagement from Youth.
        - Empowering Youth Voices
    - Provide training to staff on when to take a VR Application for students eligible for Pre-ETs:
        - Pre-Employment Transition Services Flexibility Based on NOA
        - Continue to stress the need to look at VR Services as a Continuum of Services and provide procedures on transferring cases

Help for New Pre-ETS Staff

- Helping new staff understand the why.
- New staff struggle with knowing what activities they should do with students.
  - Show them the NTACT-C website so they can see a list of activities under each of the required activities.

Working with students with Complex Needs

- Staff do not have much experience working with students with complex needs.
- We provided training to staff at our State Staff Training this summer on how to work with students that have complex needs.
  - NTACT-C has provided trainings on this subject that we utilized.

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VR
NEBRASKA

Application and Strategies: Families

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PEAK Parent Center

Helping Families Helping Children

Putting It into Practice – Real-Life Uses of NTACT:C's Greatest Hits

From Mother to Movement-Builder

The Beginning of the Journey

- 2003: Birth of twin boys, Beck and Bryan
- Beck survives with deafblindness, intellectual and developmental disabilities
- 23 weeks gestation, NICU trauma, loss, and grief
- Sparked a lifelong pursuit of purpose and advocacy

What is Transition Planning (1)

According to Colorado Dept. of Education - It is the process of preparing students for adult life after they leave high school and can be thought of as a bridge between school programs and the opportunities of adult life, including higher education or training, employment, independent living and community participation. Transition planning provides opportunities for students with disabilities to experience positive post-school outcomes, such as:

- higher graduation rate
- lower dropout rates
- increased enrollment in colleges and universities
- higher rates of competitive employment
- increase levels of independence

What is Transition Planning (2)

What to consider:

- The IEP team considers areas such as postsecondary education or vocational training, employment, independent living, and community participation.
- Transition services must be a coordinated set of activities oriented toward producing results.
- Transition services are based on the student's needs and must take into account the student's preferences and interests.

What is Transition Planning (3)

IDEA Transition Services Definition – Key words to consider in definition

- Activities need to be coordinated with each other. The process focuses on results.
- Activities must address the student's academic and functional achievement.
- Activities are intended to smooth the young person's movement into the post-school world.

Colorado Exceptional Children's Education Act - Sect. 2.51 Transition Services

How NTACT:C Resources Supported Our Family

1. Family Engagement & Communication is key in building collaboration
2. Student Voice is key to planning
3. Early Planning & Interagency Collaboration is key to success

All of these require effective collaboration with your team, community entities and student.

Family Engagement & Communication is key in building collaboration

- Start talking to the school-based team early
  Request clear transition IEP guidance
  Understand the purpose of transition goals and services.

- Research information on transition options (school based and transition programs)
  Communicate with team about use of community options (TRE, TRP, etc.).

- Communicate openly with team throughout HS to share insight of student successes in and out of the school environment.

Start Planning Early

- IEP transition planning must start by age 15 or the end of 9th grade.
- Write IEP transition goals that focus on the skills needed for independent living, education and career (ex. EF, Social, Emotional, Communicaiton, and Academic).
- Focus on capturing good data in evals & present levels to guide decisions making.
- Engage with community entities early to help build skills acquisition.

EVERY STUDENT HAS A VOICE: CASE STUDY- BECKWILLIERS

Graduation 2023

- Start early with goals to increase skills throughout HS.
- Request clear guidance on transition planning in 9th grade to facilitate early planning and collaboration.
- Provide detailed options through out HS for transition planning and goals (Career Start, SWAP, course options, etc.).
- Engage with team ahead of annual IEP to provide transition program options.
- Supports needed in school may follow student to transition program setting (CAF, SLP, Transportation, nursing, para support, etc.).

Interagency Collaboration (1)

The Williers

- Student Voice Matters (SLP addressed Beck directly) Remember, your student likely has an opinion, preference & needs to understand the plan.
- Post-secondary transition is not a one size fits all box, program or placement. Find a variety of options.
- Decisions about transition program days, times, transportation, services, etc. are made by the **team**.
- Research transition IEPs.

Transition programming must be appropriately **accessible for ALL**.
If Transition Programs can't provide services and supports in the IEP, the district is responsible for providing them. (FAPE)

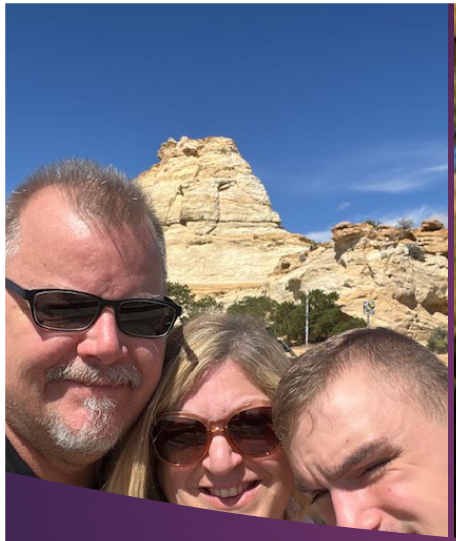
Interagency Collaboration (2)

It Takes a Community

- On Think outside the box and be creative to find ways to utilize what your school/district has to offer in order to build the skills needed to help your student meet their personal goals.
- Start early to assist your student in accessing community programs year round that can help them utilize skills in the real world setting and build on what they are learning in the school setting.
- Include the student. Have challenging goals throughout school. See the possibilities and help your student reach them.

Interagency Collaboration (3)

- Ask your student what they would like to see for their future.
- Make sure student preference is captured, focused on in the IEP, as is appropriate.
- Ask for communication support as needed in order for the student to participate in a self-directed IEP.
- Include student interests in planning for skill acquisition.

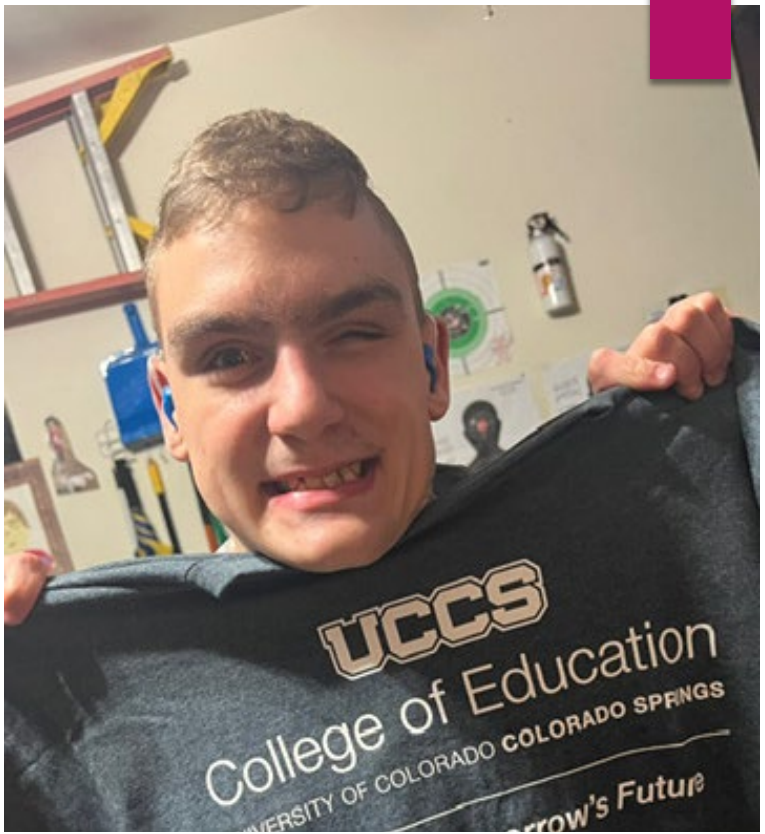


Leadership Anchored in Lived Experience

- "My life's work and my son's journey are not separate."
- From caregiving to changemaking
- Lived experience teaches resilience, urgency, and hope

Result

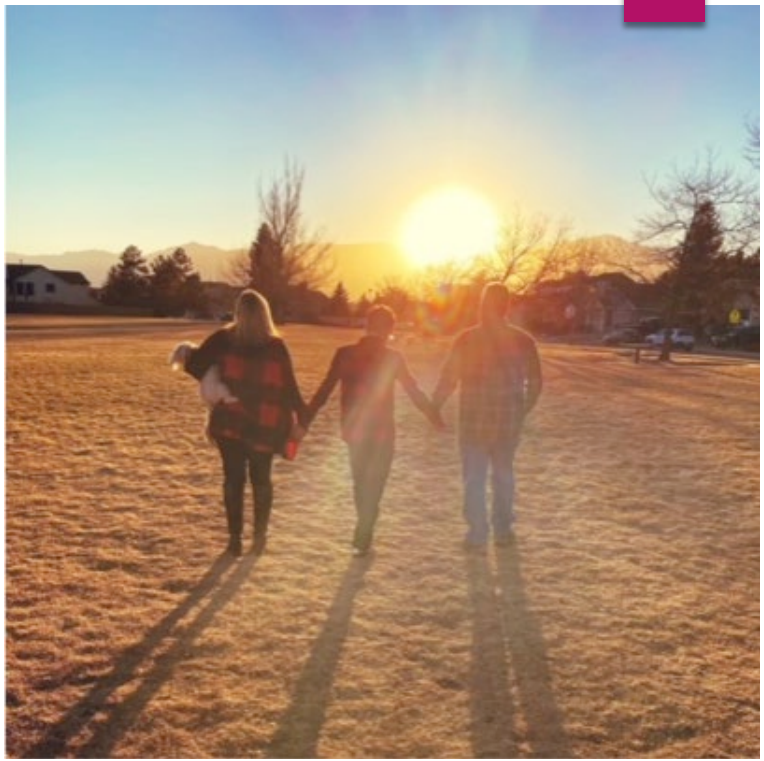
- A Thriving Young Adult Crushing Post Secondary Transition and Living a Thriving Life.



Putting It into Practice – Real-Life Uses of NTACT:C's

Final Reflections

- "Stay hopeful. Never stop believing in what's possible."



Thank You + Connect

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Thank You

Find us on:

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IDEAs that Work
Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education

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