



A PACER Center Parent Brief

Measuring Transition Success: Focus on Youth & Family Participation

Prepared by PACER Center in Collaboration with the
National Post-School Outcomes Center
University of Oregon
July 2006

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This document was prepared in collaboration with PACER Center under subcontract to the National Post-School Outcomes Center, Eugene, Oregon, (funded by Cooperative Agreement Number H324S040002) with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. This document has been approved by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.



Collecting Post-School Outcome Data

American youth with disabilities now have an opportunity to participate in shaping the future of special education in our country. To determine how well schools are preparing youth with disabilities for success after high school, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) requires states to find out whether their former special education students have pursued further education or found competitive employment within one year of leaving high school. Youth and family participation in these post-school outcome data collection efforts—soon to be conducted in every state—has the potential to usher in a new era of effective, evidence-based transition programs and practices.



Current research highlights the importance of student involvement in transition planning to adulthood. There is a logical connection between the students' stake in planning their transition from school to adult life and their post-school success. Families of youth with disabilities also play important supporting roles during their young adults' transition years; that support is critical to transition success. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEA 2004) ensures that youth and their parents have meaningful opportunities to participate in transition planning.

Gathering information on the employment and education activities of special education students after they leave school will provide families, local school districts, state departments of education, and policymakers with a clear picture of how well young people with disabilities are doing within the first year of leaving school. It will also indicate how well students were prepared while in public school. In addition, the data can be used to evaluate and improve schools and the special education system.



To collect data, many states are developing surveys. The accuracy and usefulness of the data will be dependent upon the degree to which youth and families participate in the design of state data collection efforts and the surveys themselves. To ensure a high response rate, which is critical for data accuracy, surveys should be user friendly.

Now is an opportune time for families to influence the design of their state's information collection process. Although a few states have been collecting post-school data on special education students, most state departments of education are designing new data collection systems. Consequently, many states are now seeking input from a variety of stakeholder focus groups—including former students and their families—to explore effective strategies to engage youth and families in that process.

Engaging Families

The perspectives of former students and families provide valuable information and a unique consumer viewpoint. Input from family and youth focus groups, disability advocates, parent centers, and family organizations can help states design more user-friendly and accessible survey tools that are likely to increase the response rate.

Results from focus groups conducted in Minnesota, Oregon, and Indiana suggest the following when developing and collecting data:

- Be sure students know about the post-school survey before they leave school.
- Make the questions easy to answer.
- Keep the survey relatively short (10-15 minutes to complete).
- Whenever possible, have the former student respond. If necessary, a family member who knows the person well may reply.
- If interviewing by phone, have a former teacher or trained interviewer make the call.
- Make the survey accessible, offer multiple formats (phone, online, mail) for responding.
- Provide an incentive for completing the survey.
- Report the results back to families in a format that will be useful.

Former students and families can also provide input to help states explore important questions, such as:

- What will motivate youth and families to take the time to complete a survey or provide personal information?
- What concerns might youth and families have about providing this information?
- How can those concerns be addressed?

Family organizations and disability advocates, too, can encourage youth and families to take part in completing a survey. They also can foster understanding of how their participation can affect and improve educational and transition services offered in their state.

Family members of individuals with disabilities serve on state special education advisory councils, state rehabilitation councils, steering committees, state and community transition councils, local school boards, and site-based management teams in every state. Inviting such actively involved and knowledgeable family members to participate in state post-school outcome data collection activities could have mutual benefits. As family members provide important consumer insight into proposed data collection activities, they also will gain information that can help them serve more effectively in their other roles. Ultimately their participation will strengthen

Post-school Outcome Information: The Benefits

Some states have been collecting information on the post-school outcomes of their special education students for years. The experiences of these states indicate that gathering and analyzing information on the post-school employment and education experiences of recent students helps local school districts and states to:

- focus educators, families, administrators, and students on preparing youth for postsecondary education and employment—not just success in the classroom
- identify services and experiences that contribute to better results and design more effective transition programs
- identify areas in which teachers need support or additional training
- determine the needs of specific schools and school districts and strategically target resources
- provide information that students and families can use to make informed decisions
- develop state improvement plans that result in better post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities

the capacity of states and school districts to carefully consider data on current outcomes for students with disabilities. It will also help states to identify and address problems; recognize and employ effective practices; and plan, implement, and monitor state performance plans.

Post-School Outcomes Data Collection: What the Law Requires

To measure and assess the effectiveness of secondary education and transition services, IDEA 2004 authorizes several activities. OSEP now requires each state to collect data on the postsecondary education and employment status of young adults who received special education when they were in high school. Each state must collect and report the following information to OSEP annually:

- the percentage of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school, and who are competitively employed, enrolled in postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school.

In December 2005, each state submitted a six-year State Performance Plan (SPP) to OSEP that set “measurable and rigorous” improvement goals and described plans for reaching target goals across 20 indicators. States are required to provide annual reports to the public on the progress and performance of each local educational agency located in the state on the targets set for all the indicators in the SPP. States can use their post-school outcome data to guide continuous program improvements and demonstrate progress toward improving post-school employment and enrollment in postsecondary education goals in their Annual Performance Reports to OSEP.



Post-School Surveys: What to Expect

Each year, states will contact former students who had an IEP during their last year of high school and who are no longer enrolled in secondary school. This includes drop outs (early leavers), youth who age out of special education programs, and special education graduates who leave with diplomas or other exit documents.

Some states plan to collect information from all special education students who leave school—in whatever fashion—in a particular year. States also have the option of collecting this data on a representative sample of former students if the sample accurately reflects all school leavers with IEPs in that state in a specific year. Former students are to be contacted roughly one year after they leave high school to verify their involvement in competitive work and/or postsecondary training. States are developing various methods to survey their former students. Youth may receive a phone call from a former teacher or other school district employee conducting a telephone survey, receive a survey in the mail, or be able to complete an online survey. Data on the former student may be gathered from a parent, guardian, or caregiver.

Respondents will be asked basic questions about the former student's postsecondary employment and education activities. The questions will ask if youth are working; what kind of job they have; if they are working 35 or more hours per week; if they are being paid minimum wage; if they are enrolled in any type of school, training, or education program; and if they are full-time students. Although it is not required by OSEP, some states may ask additional questions to find out more about their former students' independent living outcomes. Surveys will consist mostly of yes/no or multiple choice questions so they can be easily tabulated. States will have considerable latitude to add questions of relevance to their area.

Voluntary and Confidential

Participation in data collection will be voluntary. Personal information shared by respondents will be kept confidential. Information collected from all respondents will be compiled into anonymous statistical data to guide program improvement. Identities of individual respondents will not be reported. State results will be used for local, state, and national reporting and—most important—for guiding and improving transition services to youth with disabilities.

The National Post-School Outcomes Center

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To help states develop and implement effective strategies to collect and use post-school outcome data for youth with disabilities, OSEP funded a national center in 2004, the National Post-School Outcomes Center (NPSO) at the University of Oregon. NPSO provides technical assistance and information to help states develop and implement more uniform, accurate data collection systems. Center activities involve numerous partners including National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, Federal and Regional Resource Centers Network, Westat, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, PACER Center, National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, and State University of New York–Potsdam.

The New York Experience

New York began collecting data about the post-school employment and postsecondary education outcomes of its special education students in 1997. Findings have been used to shape changes in state policies. Those changes have resulted in measurable, improved program outcomes at the school district level.

New York reports that between 1997 and 2001:

- the rate of student participation in high school career preparation activities increased from 37 to 80 percent
- the rate of 2- and 4-year college participation increased from 17 to 38 percent
- the *Career Links Project* increased referrals to vocational rehabilitation services, resulting in successful outcomes

SOURCE: New York State Education Department, Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (2003).

Measuring Success: From Access to Achievement

Thirty years ago, children with disabilities had no federal right to a public education. Today, the foremost issue facing students with disabilities is the quality of their education. Progress has been made over the years, although parents of youth with disabilities must continue to partner with educators to improve outcomes.

While graduation rates for students with disabilities have improved since the 1980s, a disturbing 41 percent of students with disabilities drop out of high school (OSERS, 2003). Students with emotional disturbance consistently have the highest dropout rates (Lehr, 2004).

Outcomes for students with disabilities after they leave the public education system are distressing. Compared to their peers without disabilities, youth with disabilities:

- are half as likely to participate in postsecondary education
- face much higher adult unemployment rates
- are three times more likely to live in poverty as adults
- are four times more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system (NCWD, 2005)

In IDEA 2004, Congress states that “The federal government has an ongoing obligation to support activities that contribute to positive results for children with disabilities, enabling those children to lead productive and independent adult lives” [PL 108-446, 650(1)]. The post-school outcome data collection authorized by this legislation is an important and much-needed step aimed at improving adult outcomes for students with disabilities and improving the quality of the special education system.

Across the country, parents of high school students with disabilities will soon be hearing from their local school districts or state departments of education about their plans to find out how students in their state are faring after they leave school. Despite the technical nature of these activities, families and advocates should stay informed about—and participate in—their state’s data collection endeavors. Doing so will ensure that policymakers, educators, youth with disabilities, and their families have the information they need to make informed decisions. Participation in these efforts also will help schools plan more successful educational programs and better prepare students for work and life in the community after leaving high school.

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