

Secondary Education for Youth with Disabilities:

How Post-School Data Collection

Can Improve Services and Supports

A Position Paper of the

Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee –

CSEAC

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Secondary Education for Youth with Disabilities: How Post-School Data Collection Can Improve Services and Supports

A Position Statement of the CSEAC

Adopted on April 22, 2004

The Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee has taken the following position on the need to collect post-school data on students with disabilities:

WHEREAS adults with disabilities continue to have poor employment and independent living outcomes as compared with non-disabled adults, and

WHEREAS nationally, students with disabilities drop out at a rate over three times the national average for non-disabled youth, and

WHEREAS Colorado has no means by which to systematically collect dropout and post-school data on students exiting public school systems, and

WHEREAS the Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP) measures academic growth of all students in public schools, and

WHEREAS CSAP results for students with disabilities have not been correlated with improved post-school outcomes such as postsecondary attendance, employment opportunities, independent living, and social presence, and

WHEREAS it is as unknown if CSAP assessments result in improved outcomes for youth in Colorado, and

WHEREAS an accountability system to link CSAP results with positive post-school outcomes would provide Colorado constituents with results-based data, and

WHEREAS twenty-one other states have embarked upon collecting follow-along data of students with and without disabilities exiting their school systems (in the hopes of correlating in-school assessment data with post-school outcomes), and

WHEREAS the Federal government is asking for post-school outcomes data collection of students with disabilities,

We recommend that legislators, policy developers, administrators, educators, and other interested parties advocate:

1. To develop a systematic approach to the collection of post-school data to inform current practice and to assist in the evaluation and accountability of secondary services for all students, particularly,

students with disabilities, in accordance with the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process.

2. To develop and approve legislation that promotes sharing information among school districts, postsecondary institutions, and agencies.
3. To legislate the collection of in-school and post-school data that will augment the data provided through CSAP results. Involve stakeholders in the process, including professionals, employers, parents, and students.
4. To require local education agencies to report in-school transition-focused data as well as post-school follow-along data for a five year period per student. These data would be collected prior to receiving funding for the following fiscal year.
5. To require that the Colorado Department of Education allocate some of its funding toward a systematic data collection process.
6. To provide state funds and personnel resources to match CDE funds for data collection.
7. To ensure utilization of recommendations, both locally and regionally, for research-informed implementation of best practice.
8. To support formal linkages with adult service agencies and to use collected data to augment and enhance adult services for individuals with disabilities.

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Educational reform for students with disabilities has made great strides in the last thirty years. Anchored by strong civil rights and educational legislation, children and youth with disabilities enjoy opportunities to participate in free and appropriate public education. In providing access for students with disabilities to inclusive settings, Colorado ranks fourth in the nation, both in elementary and secondary education (Twenty-fourth Annual Report to Congress, 2002). Colorado also ranks among the top states in ensuring that over 98% of all students participate in the statewide assessment process.

With such heady progress accomplished, it is nonetheless perplexing to realize how little we know in Colorado about what occurs for youth with disabilities as they begin to transition from school to post-school opportunities. A dearth of data exists to corroborate whether or not school practices are effective in producing productive citizens capable of living independently, with gainful employment, and in meaningful relationships. Because Colorado has no mechanism for collecting data during school, upon graduation, or as “follow-along” when former students transition to young adulthood, we can only speculate as to whether the educational practices we have instituted have made a difference in their lives. The Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC) comprised of special education professionals, family members, and consumers, argue that without strong data to inform us, youth with exceptional learning needs cannot and will not reach the potential they, by right, deserve.

It is our strong hope that Colorado professionals and families can help to amend this problem by systematically gathering in-school and post-school data to guide our profession.

A national perspective

Over the last fifteen years, outcomes for youth with disabilities have not shown consistent improvement in all areas. Specifically, in a commissioned report to the Ranking Minority Member of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions of the U.S. Senate, the Government Accounting Office (GAO, 2003) estimates the dropout rate of students *without* disabilities to fall somewhere between 3% and 9% across states reporting such data. However, students *with* disabilities continue to evidence high dropout rates, with an overall average of 29.4%, over three times the national average, conservatively. Among this population, students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance dropped out of school at rates of 27.6% and 51.4%, respectively (Twenty-fourth Annual Report to Congress, 2002). This figure has remained constant for a decade despite national and state efforts to provide access to the general education curriculum and to focus on direct accountability systems.

From 1987 to 1993, the largest study of youth with disabilities was conducted. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) followed the transition to post-school life of 8,000 youth with disabilities. The results of this study were insightful (Wagner et al., 1991). Upon exiting school, students evidenced a pattern of under- or unemployment, with wages often lower than minimum wage. Students reported feelings of disassociation and isolation in their communities, and a continued dependence on family support and federal monetary assistance. A disproportionate amount of students

continued to live at home as compared with non-disabled “typical” youth. For youth with emotional disabilities, one in five was arrested while in school; that figure rose for students who had exited school early to a rate of one in three. Students with more significant disabilities, including cognitive, sensory, and multiple disabilities, had difficulties engaging in competitive employment opportunities. In seeking to improve these disparities, it is no surprise that the U.S. Department of Education and Congress mandated the inclusion of transition-related activities in 1990 into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA defines transition as:

“...a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living or community participation. (Sec. 602(a)19)

Transition services are mandated for students who are age 16, with transition planning through appropriate access to general education content beginning at age 14. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is currently funding a ten-year, follow-along study that seeks to reprise the original NLTS. The National Longitudinal Transition Study Two (NLTS2) is designed to compare the current status of students with disabilities, both in-school and post-school, to determine the characteristics of these students, the extent and quality of the services they receive, their academic and vocational progress in school and beyond, their integration into the community at large, and the extent to which programs for youth with disabilities have been altered since the late 1980s. The study includes data collected from over 11,000 eligible students, their

parents, and their teachers, representing all disability categories and geographic regions of the nation.

Preliminary findings (initially presented Summer, 2003) report on secondary academic experiences for youth with disabilities. There are significant increases in academic course-taking by youth with disabilities; 95% take language arts courses, 92% take math courses, and 83% and 88% take science and social studies courses, respectively. The vast majority of these courses are offered in general education settings. This represents a 12% increase from the 1987 NLTS study. However, only 14% of these students are found to be learning at grade level. Fully 35% of students with disabilities continue to work five or more grade levels *below* their actual grade level. This is reflected in the grades reported in general education courses; 50% of these youth receive Cs, Ds, or Fs.

Schools report a significant decline in the numbers of vocationally-oriented courses. Nationally, there was a 15% decline in the number of students taking vocational education courses, due to both a decrease in course offerings coupled with an increase in academic courses. Only 25% of secondary youth with disabilities participated in on- or off-campus work experiences. The original NLTS found that students who engaged in meaningful employment and occupationally-oriented courses while still in school were *significantly* more likely to hold competitive-wage jobs after leaving school. Although transition planning and services have been required since 1990 through IDEA, only 64% of youth with disabilities are receiving instruction in transition planning. Results from the Federal Resource Center's (1999) analyses of state improvement plans support this finding. Over 88% of states were found to be non-compliant with transition

requirements, including transition-focused IEP development, student and family involvement, and agency linkages. Colorado has been cited by OSEP as needing to improve the delivery of consistent and quality transition services (OSEP Monitoring Report, 2000).

Thus, we can see that the attainment of successful post-school outcomes (i.e., academic gains, postsecondary training, and competitive employment commensurate with typical peers) continues to prove problematic for youth with disabilities and their families. The National Organization on Disabilities confirms these outcomes through the results of their Harris Survey on Americans with Disabilities (NOD, 2000). Of the total working age population, only 32% of people with disabilities are employed full or part-time, as compared with 81% of non-disabled people, a gap of 49 percentage points. People with disabilities are almost three times more likely than non-disabled individuals to live in poverty. They are also less likely to socialize with friends and peers in the community. Although substantial gains have been noted for young adults ages 18-29 in employment, pursuit of postsecondary education, and societal presence, a definitive lag continues. What are we doing in Colorado to attend to these problems? What is Colorado doing to assist youth with disabilities?

It is difficult to obtain substantive and consistent analyses of the status of youth with disabilities in Colorado. Legislated and philosophical beliefs regarding the need for strong local control by local education agencies (LEAs) override the need to collect statewide data. Few school districts collect or report exit information of students with *or without* disabilities. While state efforts have mandated the assessment and reporting of academic gains, we have no information that informs us whether students are

increasingly successful in the transition to graduation, pursuit of postsecondary options, independent living options, or gainful employment. The assumption that a strong academic focus will produce a qualified workforce is as yet untested.

A strong body of evidence reporting academic growth is presented through the Colorado Standardized Assessment Process (CSAP). The 2003 results for 10th grade Colorado youth with disabilities indicate that students are measured as proficient 17%, 7%, and 3%, in 10th grade reading, writing, and math, respectively. They demonstrate unsatisfactory progress in reading, writing, and math 42%, 36%, and 70%, respectively.

Table1. CSAP Results for 10th grade

Subject area	Unsatisfactory	Proficient
Reading	42%	17%
Writing	36%	7%
Math	70%	3%

Although steady gains have been noted over the past three years, this academic pattern in Colorado reflects the existing data offered through the NLTS2; disabled students continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers. Results from the CSAP provide only immediate evaluation of certain academic skills. The CSAP is not designed to provide alternate forms of evidence of student success, both in school and beyond. Do CSAP results correlate with future success? We have no way of knowing this. And yet, aren't *ultimate* student successes measured on their ability to act as productive, employed, and engaged citizens? If this is our goal, the CSAP cannot act as the sole determinant of student growth and achievement.

To that end, we advocate a comprehensive accountability system that provides for alternate means by which to measure student progress, including in the workplace and the community. Systematic transition planning can assist with this process, but it represents only *in-school* attempts at promoting positive *post-school* outcomes. Other data collection systems are still critically needed to ensure a productive citizenry for Colorado's future.

As part of CDE's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP), parents statewide were surveyed regarding their children's involvement in Colorado's special education process. (CIMP Parent Survey, 2003). Fifty-three percent of parents of high school students with disabilities reported that someone knowledgeable in the area of transition planning attended their child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. Of the parents surveyed during the 2002-2003 school year, less than half of the parents (49%) reported that their child's IEP reflected education or employment beyond high school. Likewise, only 42% and 30% of the parents reported that the IEP reflected planning for independence and community participation post-high school, respectively. Thirty-one percent of parents were aware of agencies to assist students post high-school. Finally, nearly 20% of all parents surveyed reported they were *not aware at all* of options for their child after high school.

To assist in ameliorating inconsistent transition planning across the state, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), Exceptional Student Services Unit (ESSU), is coordinating a statewide effort to assist local school districts to meet the transition requirements of IDEA. Known as the Transition Outcomes Project (TOPs), Local Education Agencies (LEAs), with the assistance of the Secondary Services Team of the

ESSU, gather and systematically analyze baseline data measuring the accuracy of IEPs developed for secondary-aged youth with disabilities engaged in the transition process. Since the inception of TOPs three years ago, eight Board of Cooperative Educational Services Units (BOCES), 15 independent school districts, and the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind are in the process of collecting data from IEP file reviews, and are then subsequently planning and implementing strategies to achieve compliance as well as best practice in the transition process. Initial results indicate a wide range of compliance. For example, a statewide range of 13% to 59% of IEPs include a statement of transition service needs. IEPs reflect an articulated movement from school to post-school outcomes ranging from 2% to 60% across districts. A statement of interagency linkages appears from 12% to 54% of the time in IEP reviews. Clearly, improved transition-focused IEP development is necessary (Colorado Department of Education, 2003).

Finally, few data have been collected from students themselves as they transition to post-school life. In 1999, a survey developed by the Colorado School-to-Career regional centers queried high school juniors and seniors (primarily students without disabilities), asking them (among other things) how prepared they felt themselves to be for post-school lives (What Works, 1999). Of the nearly 9,000 students reporting, students with three or more career experiences *while in high school* were 54% more likely to attend postsecondary education than those without career experiences. Of those with previous career experiences, over 75% reported being excited about their future. Students also reported that they were more motivated to learn when they were allowed to solve real life problems (61%), and to be involved in experiential activities (78%).

It is painfully evident that while Colorado is providing excellent data regarding the academic achievement of its students, measurements of student growth beyond academics are extremely limited. As stated previously, it is assumed that academic achievement results in positive outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood. HB1313 states the outcomes of education to be productive and contributing citizens. Academic achievement alone is not proven to assure that students assume positive adult roles upon the exit of the educational system. Both the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will continue to mandate expectations of educational accountability for students' lives and beyond. While Colorado House Bill 1313 (HB 93-1313) has as its goal the expectation of positive outcomes for all students, CSAP results offer only a partial picture of what may be needed to ensure such outcomes.

Nationally, in order to meet this challenge, almost half of the states have decided to collect post-school outcome data on students with disabilities exiting school. Currently, 21 states have developed mechanisms to collect post-school outcome data (Storms, 2003). Some states collect these data for students with disabilities only, while other states include all students. According to the Western Regional Resource Center, states in our region conducting systematic post-school outcomes data include California, Idaho, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington. Generally, data collection includes measures of graduation and dropout rate, postsecondary educational attendance, employment, community engagement or "presence," independent living, and agency connection. Data collection methodologies include in-school surveys and interviews, as well as follow-along surveys up to five years after the student exit date.

Costs and funding vary among states. Some states use federal funds, while other states have allocated funds from legislative budgets. For example New York uses IDEA monies for a \$2.75 million, seven -year follow-along study, while Florida has allocated approximately \$400,000 from state 2002-2003 funding for its efforts (GAO Report, 2003). Results of the studies are being used for a variety of purposes. First, they are used to inform practice, so educators may implement strategies that best conform to needed competencies post-school. Data allow for more efficient and precise technical assistance. In some states, data collection is a required component of the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP). Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are using the information to generate local improvement plans. Finally, interagency collaboration is being strengthened through formalized agreements articulated through post-school data.

The Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee believes strongly the time has arrived for systematically incorporating both in-school and post-school data collection mechanisms. If students with disabilities are to transition to productive adulthood, a conscientious analysis of the transition process, coupled with strong predictors for adult success is warranted. We offer suggestions to accomplish these goals.

Recommendations

We recommend that legislators, policy developers, administrators, educators, and other interested parties advocate:

1. To develop a systematic approach to the collection of post-school data to inform current practice and to assist in the evaluation and accountability of secondary services for all students, particularly, students with disabilities, in accordance with the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process.
2. To develop and approve legislation that promotes sharing information among school districts, postsecondary institutions, and agencies.

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