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The Transition to Adulthood for the Special Education Population

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The seeds of a successful transition to adulthood are planted well before high school graduation. This may be especially true for youth with cognitive, emotional, or physical limitations, who are typically at greater risk for poorer outcomes in the job market and in their civic lives. The nation has made great strides in seeing that youth with various disabilities are supported in school, mainly through special education programs. It has also seen great strides in helping youth plan for life after school, via transitional planning programs. However, as Phyllis Levine and Mary Wagner show in their chapters in *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*, edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth (forthcoming University of Chicago Press, 2005), more can be done.¹ This brief summarizes two chapters in the book, outlining how youth in special education are supported while in school and after.

Special Education and Transitional Planning

As the Network on Transitions to Adulthood has documented,² the roadmap leading from high school graduation to college, to jobs, and to starting a family—in other words, the path to becoming an adult—has changed dramatically in the last few decades. As a result, many young adults today are struggling to get on their feet. Students whose school careers have been challenged by physical, learning, or emotional difficulties are likely to face additional difficulties.

Students who struggle in school, as many special education students do, are more likely to drop out, and as a result, are more likely to find it difficult to secure a good job. As Levine and Wagner report, about 30% of students receiving special education services will leave school without a diploma. Perhaps not surprisingly, only 4% of students in special education had ever been enrolled in a four-year college 3–5 years after high school. Students in special education are also more likely to face other setbacks, such as a criminal history, single motherhood, poverty, or substance abuse.³

Although special education services have been in force since the 1970s, and in 2003–2004 served approximately 6.7 million students, it was in the 1980s that educators and families began to draw attention to helping students make a more successful transition from high school to young adulthood. Their efforts culminated in the 1997 revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which required the “individualized education program” to include transitional planning as a way to prepare the youth for the challenges of adulthood. In addition to a focus on

¹ The volume is a product of the Network on Transitions to Adulthood, funded by the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation.

² See <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu> for available research from the Network. See also *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, edited by Rick Settersten et al. (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ We know quite a bit about the special education population because of the foresight of the government to fund the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students, the most recent incarnation of which is the NLST2, a 10-year study of more than 11,000 youth aged 13–16 in 2001. Most of the findings reported here are based on that study.

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vocational training and school-to-work programming, IDEA mandates that a transition plan with necessary supports be in place and implemented by age 16 for special education students.

In 2001, about 89% of high school special education students had a transition plan underway. However, as Levine and Wagner note, there are no uniform curricula or programs, or even standards, guiding these plans, and as such, they vary widely in their content and success. In fact, many states have failed to achieve even minimal levels of compliance with the IDEA mandated transition services. Further, the process receives mixed reviews from parents, the authors find. A little more than one-third find them very useful, while nearly half think they are somewhat useful, and about one in five find them not at all useful.

Gaining Work Experience

Part of the transitional plan often includes vocational education courses. About 60% of special education students in 2001, for example, were taking a vocational education course in a semester, about half of whom were taking occupationally specific courses. However, participation in vocational education classes has declined by about 15% from a decade earlier, perhaps because of the increased emphasis on academic courses in recent years. As the authors argue, this increased emphasis on college-bound coursework may not be beneficial to all special education students. Students with disabilities who concentrated their courses in an occupational area were more likely to be competitively employed (versus sheltered employment or volunteer activities) after high school, and for youth with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or mild mental retardation, such a concentration also contributed to higher earnings.

Attaining independence after school is a goal for most youth, including those with disabilities. Two years after leaving high school, however, only about 11% of special education youth were living independently. Most families rely on the school for information on services available to their child after graduation. However, the notion of a smooth hand off from school to community services or resources can be illusive, perhaps a reason for this low rate of independence. Once they leave the school grounds, youth must stitch together a set of services from a patchwork of adult policies and programs with often conflicting eligibility standards, extensive documentation requirements, confusing payment structures, inconsistent procedures, and inexperienced staff. Further the various service providers often lack knowledge of one another's system rules or procedures or are hampered by other bureaucratic constraints that preclude interagency cooperation.

Policy and Program Opportunities

The authors offer several innovative strategies for smoothing the transition to adulthood for youth with special needs. Given the tangle of service and government supports, it would be helpful to families to create a "single portal" approach to eligibility, funding, and support. A single entry and delivery point can reduce paperwork and red tape, shorten waiting lists, ease client confusion, and better prevent individuals who do not fit neatly into any one service category from falling through the cracks.

Coordination among service providers is essential. In 2003, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provided grants to 31 agencies to develop a plan for coordinating efforts among agencies that serve children and adults with developmental disabilities. The long-term goal is to establish one-stop shopping centers for services. If proved successful, this approach could be a model for transitional services.

Using the resources provided under the Work Investment Act (WIA), Social Security, and the Americans with Disabilities Act should also be a priority. Title I of WIA, for example, focuses on youth aged 14–21, in or out of school. Although typically earmarked for low-income, at-risk youth, up to 5% of youth served in a local area can be exempt from income requirements if they have a disability or are at one or more grade levels below their age. WIA also requires at least 30% of its funds be used for youth who have dropped out of school, who have a high school degree or GED but who are deficient in basic skills, or who are unemployed.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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Systems reform is more than fixing broken parts. It involves moving from a culture of failure, which is designed to “fix” people and provide services only after they have become dysfunctional, to one of prevention, where early and accurate identification of learning and behavioral problems and aggressive intervention guided by quality research are at the forefront.

Finally, the No Child Left Behind act, with its increased emphasis on academic standards, has shifted the emphasis for special education students away from vocational education. Although improved academic performance is consistent with the goals of special education policy, it is not the only or ultimate outcome expected for children and youth with disabilities. The primary intention of the free appropriate public education guaranteed by IDEA to children and youth with disabilities is to “prepare them for employment and independent living.”

The rapidly changing workforce, advances in technology, and changing views of disability all carry significant implications for the special education population as they seek a quality of life as adults. Young people with disabilities who may have been isolated in institutions just a few decades ago now have greater opportunities for independence owing, in part, to these advances. Perhaps now more than ever, the authors argue, it is vital to understand how our education, social, and political systems will respond, how school and social policies will shift, and most important, how our most vulnerable youth will cope as they transition from childhood to adulthood during the coming years.

Based on Phyllis Levine and Mary Wagner, “Transition for Young Adults Who Received Special Education Services as Adolescents: A Time of Challenge and Change” (chapter 8), and “Transition Experiences of Young Adults Who Received Special Education Services as Adolescents: A Matter of Policy” (chapter 9). In On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations, edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth. University of Chicago Press, forthcoming fall 2005.

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