

Improving Educational Outcomes and Post-School Success for Students with Disabilities

Berkeley Yorkery, MPP; David W. Test, PhD

In any given year, approximately 10,000 students with disabilities^a start high school in North Carolina. Four years later, only half of these students graduate with a regular diploma (56.8% vs. 71.7% of all high school students).¹ Although North Carolina's graduation rate for students with disabilities has been improving (from 50.0% in 2007 to 56.8% in 2009), far too many students with disabilities are not leaving high school prepared for competitive work or postsecondary education. Surveys of students with disabilities who are no longer in school (due to graduating or dropping out) show that 27% were neither employed nor enrolled in school in the year after they left high school.² Students with intellectual disabilities were least likely to be engaged in work or school (47%).² Students with disabilities often face additional obstacles to success in school; however, we know that certain policies, programs, and services make them more likely to succeed both in school and in the transition to adulthood. North Carolina schools need to implement more evidence-based strategies to improve graduation rates and successful post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

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In-depth reviews of the experiences of students with disabilities have shown that many enter high school with weak academic skills and could benefit from comprehensive literacy and mathematics programs, but few high schools offer such services.³ Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all schools must provide a full continuum of special education services to students with disabilities, including the types of bridge courses mentioned above. The fact that many students with disabilities could benefit from bridge courses can be seen in their performance on end-of-course (EOC) tests for core academic areas (Algebra I, Biology, Civics and Economics, English I, and US History). Students with disabilities generally do not perform well on these EOCs, with less than 42% achieving a passing score (see Table 1).^b

Adding to these challenges, North Carolina has recently revised its graduation requirements to make them more rigorous. In the past, all students had a choice of three courses of study (Career Prep, College Tech Prep, or College/University Prep) and some students with disabilities could also elect to participate in the Occupational Course of Study (OCS). The Occupational

a. Unless otherwise stated, "students with disabilities" in this article refers to all children with disabilities, regardless of the type of disability. The federal government recognizes 13 categories under which a child may qualify for special education including autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment.

b. Passing EOCs for the five core academic areas is a graduation requirement for all non-exempted students.

Berkeley Yorkery, MPP, is a project director at the North Carolina Institute of Medicine. She can be reached at byorkery (at) nciom.org. **David W. Test, PhD**, is a professor in the Department of Special Education and Child Development at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is also a co-principal investigator for the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center.

Table 1.
Only One in Three Students with Disabilities Perform at or Above Proficient on End-of-Course Tests in Core Academic Areas

	Algebra I (percent at or above proficient)	Biology (percent at or above proficient)	Civics/ Economics (percent at or above proficient)	English I (percent at or above proficient)	US History (percent at or above proficient)
Students without a disability	69.4% (n=125,799)	67.6% (n=86,431)	68.2% (n=96,117)	75.9% (n=100,417)	66.3% (n=82,929)
Students with a disability	33.2% (n=10,166)	37.6% (n=7,306)	37.4% (n=8,174)	35.4% (n=10,144)	41.8% (n=6,254)

Source: State Board of Education/Department of Public Instruction. *Report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee. North Carolina High Schools and Students with Disabilities: A Study of Educational Services and Outcomes*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Dept of Public Instruction and State Board of Education; 2009.

Course of Study is a transition-focused curriculum available only to students with disabilities and is designed for students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities who need a modified general curriculum that focuses on post-school employment and independent living. Federal law requires that no more than 2% of students take alternate assessments (which students in the OCS do), which limits the number of students who can elect to follow the OCS.^c The new guidelines, effective for all incoming 9th graders for the 2009-2010 school year, have only two courses of study for students with disabilities: the Future Ready Course of Study, which is very closely aligned with the previous College/University Prep course of study, and the OCS. Although the OCS is still available to some students with disabilities, the requirements for the OCS have been increased (for example, students in the OCS will have to pass algebra to graduate). These changes will likely make it more difficult for students with disabilities to graduate.

Schools play a critical role in helping all children acquire the skills and knowledge needed to be successful as adults. This is particularly true for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) who may face additional challenges as they transition into adulthood. According to IDEA, all students with disabilities are required to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to help ensure they receive the individualized attention and supports they need to succeed in school. Even though students with disabilities have IEPs, many still lack the supports necessary to successfully complete high school and transition into independent living, employment, or post-secondary education.

As part of their IEP, all students with disabilities are supposed to have postsecondary goals and a transition plan

in place that includes coordinated transition services which will reasonably enable the students to meet their goals. In 2007, 85.8% of students with disabilities ages 16 and older had postsecondary goals and a transition plan as part of their IEP. Although this is an improvement (only 60% had them in 2005), it is clear that many students with disabilities in North Carolina are not receiving the guidance and support mandated by IDEA. Of those IEPs with postsecondary goals and a transition plan, 50% did not involve agencies outside the school.² Including agencies outside the school is critical to ensuring the successful integration of students with disabilities into their communities. In particular, students with I/DD need to establish linkages to postsecondary schools, vocational rehabilitation, Local Management Entities (LMEs), and other agencies and organizations that provide support early on to ensure they become active participants in the community when they leave high school.

In order to ensure full implementation of IDEA and to help states build capacity and support for children with disabilities, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center^a (NSTTAC), under the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, identifies evidence-based and promising practices for transitions. NSTTAC research has identified a number of in-school predictors of post-school success in employment, education, and independent living (see Table 2, page 544) and matches them to evidence-based practices that can be implemented in high schools.

NSTTAC has matched each in-school predictor to evidence-based practices that support that particular predictor. For example, occupational courses improve employment and independent living outcomes. Occupational courses may teach evidence-based practices including

c. Lee F. Consultant, Mental Disabilities, Secondary Education and Transition Services, Exceptional Children Division, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Oral communication. February 11, 2009. Written (email) communication. February 19, 2009.

d. The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, based at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, is federally funded to identify research-based practices in transition, disseminate these practices, and assist states in their adoption.

Table 2.
In-School Predictors of Post-School Success

	Employment	Education	Independent Living
Academic/general education		✓	
Career awareness	✓	✓	
Community experiences			✓
Exit exam requirements/high school diploma status		✓	
Interagency collaboration		✓	
Occupational courses	✓		✓
Paid work experience	✓		✓
Parental involvement		✓	✓
School integration	✓	✓	✓
Self-advocacy/self-determination		✓	✓
Self-care/independent living skills	✓		✓
Social skills	✓	✓	✓
Student support		✓	✓
Transition program	✓	✓	✓
Vocational education	✓		
Work study	✓		

Source: Test DW, Mazzotti V, Mustian A, White J, Fowler C. Evidence-based secondary transition practices and predictors. Presented to: The North Carolina Institute of Medicine Task Force on Transitions for People with Developmental Disabilities; November 19, 2008; Morrisville, NC. Note: For the current list of predictors, see: <http://www.nsttac.org/ebp/PredictorFiles/PredictorsByOutcomeTable.pdf>

functional reading and math, banking skills, purchasing skills, and life skills. For many evidence-based practices that are identified, the NSTTAC provides lesson plans to help teachers implement the practices. These lesson plans are free and available for teachers online. Although many of these evidence-based practices could be incorporated into courses for students with disabilities for little cost, the increasing focus on academic coursework over the past decade has left little time for courses teaching life and occupational skills.

In order to best serve children and young adults with disabilities in the least restrictive settings and to integrate them into communities as they become adults, schools

must help students acquire the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education, the workforce, and independent living. North Carolina schools could be doing much more to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The NSTTAC has identified a number of evidence-based practices that schools can integrate into coursework for students with disabilities and can provide the technical assistance schools need to implement these practices. By implementing evidence-based practices, North Carolina schools would considerably improve the chances that our students with disabilities will be successful, not just in school, but also in life. **NCMJ**

REFERENCES

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2. Exceptional Children Division, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. *North Carolina Part B Annual Performance Report (APR) for 2007-2008*. <http://www.nccecas.org/downloads/downloads/APR%202009Final%20Submission.pdf>. Published April 7, 2009. Accessed November 11, 2009.
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