

## 1. EXAMINING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORT OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has brought an increased awareness of the importance of family-school connections by focusing on the integral role parents play in assisting their children's learning, encouraging parents to be actively involved in their children's education, and including, for the first time in the history of federal education legislation, a specific statutory definition of parent involvement.

The evidence is persuasive and consistent that families play a critical role in nurturing their children's educational growth. Multiple comprehensive reviews of family involvement research have found that when parents are involved in education, students benefit (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). Families' support for their children's education is a significant contributor to a range of positive outcomes, including:

- ◆ Improved student motivation to learn and academic self-confidence (Ames, Khoju, & Watkins, 1993; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).
- ◆ A stronger sense of self as a learner (Eccles, Goldsmith, Jacobs, & Flanagan, 1988).
- ◆ More consistent attendance (Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001).
- ◆ Improved homework completion and greater time spent on homework (Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998; Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000).
- ◆ Improved behavior in school (Epstein, 1987a; Gonzalez, 2002).
- ◆ Improved academic performance (Finn, 1998; Keith et al., 1998; Simon, 2001b; Van Voorhis, 2001), including achievement on standardized tests (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998; Zellman & Waterman, 1998).
- ◆ Higher school completion rates (Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulas, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990).
- ◆ More clearly defined future plans and educational expectations (Eccles et al., 1988; Trusty, 1999).
- ◆ Higher rates of postsecondary education enrollment (Eagle, 1989).

Family support for learning is important for all students, but it may be particularly important for children with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Families of those with disabilities played a vital role in the creation and implementation of the first federal law mandating education for all children with disabilities, P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA), which later became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Rothstein, 2000; Weintraub, Abeson, Ballard, & LaVor, 1976).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On December 3, 2004, President Bush signed into law the "Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004" (PL 108-446) — the most recent amendments to Parts A-D, which will go into effect (for Parts B and C) on July 1, 2005.

One of the main tenets of IDEA, as amended in 1997 (IDEA '97), is parents' participation in decision-making related to their children's education. The regulations for IDEA '97 stipulate that "each public agency shall take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP [individualized education program] meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate" [Section 300.345(a)]. Policy-makers were so committed to parental involvement in the education of students with disabilities that the regulations specify that "if neither parent can attend, the public agency shall use other methods to ensure parent participation, including individual or conference telephone calls" [Section 300.345(c)] and that "the public agency shall take whatever action is necessary to ensure that the parent understands the proceedings at the IEP meeting" [Section 300.345(e)].

Despite legislative support for parental involvement, little information has been available until now to examine the actual level of family support for education that is given to middle- and high-school-age students with disabilities. Thus, it has not been clear whether variations in family involvement that have been observed in the general population for families with children of different ages and with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, household incomes, and other characteristics also apply to families of students with disabilities. Schools and others creating programs to promote family involvement have had little information to guide their efforts to support family-school partnerships for students with disabilities.

In addition to there being a dearth of information about the involvement of families of students with disabilities overall, much of the family involvement research, whether for students with disabilities or their peers in the general population, has focused on students in elementary school, with less attention to the involvement of families of students in secondary school. Yet research has found that family involvement continues to play an important role in the success of secondary school students (Bursuck, Rose, Coven, & Yahaya, 1989; Catsambis, 2002; Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Gonzalez, 2002; Simon, 2001a).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) provides the first national picture of the involvement of families in the educational development of their secondary-school-age children with disabilities. NLTS2 is one component of a portfolio of longitudinal studies that span the age range of children and youth with disabilities. These studies are sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education in response to requirements of IDEA '97.

NLTS2 is a rich source of information on the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of youth with disabilities who were ages 13 through 16 and receiving special education services in grade 7 or above when they were sampled in 2000. Information is being collected about these youth five times during this 10-year study, from parents, school staff, and the youth themselves, as they transition from secondary school to early adulthood. Findings from this nationally representative sample generalize to youth with disabilities nationally and to youth in each of the 12 federal special education disability categories in use for students in the NLTS2 age range.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Appendix A for details about the NLTS2 design, sample, analysis approach, and measurement issues. Additional information about NLTS2, including previously released reports, are available at [www.nlts2.org](http://www.nlts2.org).

## Research Questions

This report considers the following questions for secondary-school-age students with disabilities receiving special education:

- ❖ To what extent do families of secondary-school-age students with disabilities engage in activities at home and at school that support their children's educational development? How does this level of involvement compare with that of families in the general population?
- ❖ What are the relationships between student and family characteristics and levels of family involvement? How do these relationships compare with those of families in the general population?
- ❖ What are families' expectations for their children's future education and independence?
- ❖ To what extent do differences in levels of family involvement and family expectations relate to variations in students' school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence?

## Information Sources

These questions are addressed primarily by using data collected from parents or guardians<sup>3</sup> of NLTS2 study members during spring and summer of 2001. Parents provide their unique perspective on their children's schools, programs, and future attainments, as well as on their own participation in their children's education at home and at school. Telephone interviews addressed these important topics; mail questionnaires were administered to parents who could not be reached by phone. An 82% response rate resulted in interview/survey data for 9,230 students; they were ages 13 through 17 at the time. Information collected from staff of schools attended by students with disabilities in the 2001-02 school year also is used in identifying variations in students' achievements related to differences in levels of family involvement (Chapter 6).<sup>4</sup>

## Technical Notes

Readers should remember the following issues when interpreting the findings in this report:

- ❖ **Descriptive findings are weighted.** NLTS2 was designed to provide a national picture of the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of youth with disabilities in the NLTS2 age range. Therefore, all the statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special education in the NLTS2 age group, as well as those in each disability category individually. Each response for each sample member is weighted to represent the number of youth nationally who are in his or her disability category in the kind of school district (defined by region, student enrollment, and proportion of students in poverty) or special school from which he or she was selected.

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<sup>3</sup> For simplicity, parents and guardians are referred to as parents in this report.

<sup>4</sup> Additional information on parent and school surveys is presented in Appendix A.

- ❖ **Standard errors.** For each mean and percentage in this report, a standard error is presented that indicates the precision of the estimate. For example, a variable with a weighted estimated value of 50% and a standard error of 2 means that the value for the total population, if it had been measured, would, with 95% confidence, lie between 48% and 52% (i.e., within plus or minus 2 percentage points of 50%). Thus, smaller standard errors allow for greater confidence to be placed in the estimate, whereas larger ones require caution.
- ❖ **Small samples.** Although NLTS2 data are weighted to represent the population, the size of standard errors is influenced heavily by the actual number of youth in a given group (e.g., a disability category). Groups with very small samples have comparatively large standard errors (in fact, findings are not reported separately for groups that do not include at least 35 sample members). For example, because there are relatively few youth with deaf-blindness, estimates for that group have relatively large standard errors. Therefore, readers should be cautious in interpreting results for this group and others with small sample sizes and large standard errors.
- ❖ **Significant differences.** Only differences among groups that reach a level of statistical significance of at least .05 are mentioned in the text; significance levels generally are noted in the text. Appendix A outlines a method for using standard errors to calculate the significance of differences between groups of interest.

## Organization of the Report

The chapters in this report generally correspond to the research questions posed. Chapters 2 and 3 describe families' involvement in their children's education at home and at school. Chapter 4 explores the relationship between student and family characteristics and differences in levels of involvement, using a multivariate analysis approach.<sup>5</sup> Chapter 5 looks to the future, discussing parents' expectations for their children's education and independence. Chapter 6 addresses the relationship between levels of involvement and student outcomes, synthesizing findings from earlier analyses on student achievements. The final chapter identifies key lessons learned about families' involvement in their children's education during their secondary school years. Appendix A provides details of the NLTS2 design, sample, measures, and analysis approaches, including definitions of the disability categories used throughout this report. Appendix B contains background information on the demographic characteristics of students with disabilities represented in NLTS2 and their families. Appendix C presents the estimated differences for the models included in Chapter 4. Appendix D provides a description of the independent variables included in the multivariate analyses presented in Chapter 6. Appendix E presents unweighted sample sizes for the analyses reported in the data tables.

This document is one in a series of reports from NLTS2 that began in 2003 and will continue over the next several years. The following chapters provide the first national picture of family involvement in the educational development of secondary school students with disabilities.

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<sup>5</sup> Multivariate analysis techniques (i.e., linear and logistic regression) are used to identify the independent relationships of various family and youth characteristics with differences in levels of involvement. Such analyses estimate the magnitude and direction of relationships for numerous explanatory factors, statistically holding constant the other factors in the analysis. Multivariate analysis procedures are described further in Appendix A.