1. PLANNING FOR TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO ADULTHOOD FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Transition planning became a focus of federal policy for students with disabilities in the mid-1980s, when it was conceptualized as a "bridge" from school to young adulthood (Will, 1984). Since that time, transition planning and postschool outcomes have received much attention in special education research, with results influencing changes in classroom instruction, school policies, and legislation.

In early conceptualizations of educational transition, concerns focused on the "floundering period" (Halpern, 1990, 1992), the interval starting immediately after high school through the time the young adult either went to college or found a job. Since then, the term has become both more complex and less limited regarding age and time. The current notion of transition generally refers to the passage from one distinct educational stage or program to the next, during which children and youth may enter, continue, or exit from special education services, as determined by age, disability assessment, and/or individual need. Such transitions present challenges for children and youth served by special education and provide focus for practitioners.

This report examines efforts to prepare youth with disabilities for the last of these transitions—the movement from high school to young adulthood. It highlights the transition planning process undertaken during high school with and for youth with disabilities as they prepare for life after school.

Planning and Services for the Transition from Secondary School to Adult Life

In its 1997 reauthorization, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) acknowledged that a primary purpose of the free appropriate public education guaranteed to children and youth with disabilities is to "prepare them for employment and independent living" [IDEA '97 Final Regulations, Section 300.1(a)]. Requirements were added to IDEA '97 to include transition planning in the individualized education programs (IEPs) of all secondary school students with disabilities beginning at age 14 or earlier in an effort to prepare them for the challenges of adulthood. Specifically, IDEA '97 requires that:

> for each student with a disability beginning at age 14 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team), and updated annually, a statement of the transition service needs of the student under the applicable components of the student's IEP that focuses on the student's courses of study (such as participation in advanced-placement courses or a vocational education program); and for each student beginning at age 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team), a statement of needed transition services for the student, including, if appropriate, a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages [IDEA '97 Final Regulations, Section 300.347(b)(1, 2)].

One outcome of these transition requirements has been to focus attention on how students' educational programs can be planned to help them achieve their goals for life after secondary school and how postschool services can be identified that will promote students' successful movement from school to postschool life.

Together with their parents, students with disabilities are expected to play a vital role in their own transition planning, particularly with regard to career decisions, residential options, recreational and social choices, and independent living (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [NICHCY], 1999). Student's preferences and interests are intended to be an integral part of the decision-making regarding transition services. Depending on the purpose of the IEP meeting, in addition to students, parents, and school staff, other participants may be involved as well. For example, if one of the purposes of the meeting is to consider transition services for a student, school staff are expected to invite "a representative of any other agency that is likely to be responsible for providing or paying for transition services" [IDEA '97 Final Regulations, Section 300.344(b)(3)(i); NICHCY, 1999].

Students receiving special education services in secondary school are being encouraged to develop decision-making and self-determination skills to enhance their ability to express their views and to advocate for their preferences and needs, and to make judgments that reflect competence, motivation, and personal ambition (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996; Zhang, 2001). Instead of having life choices made for them, the preferences and expectations of youth with disabilities are increasingly being expressed and taken into account, especially with regard to their planning their transition from school to adult life (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000). Recent research on self-directed transition planning suggests that many students are attending their IEP meetings (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999) and that their self-determination is a cornerstone for successful transitions. Students who are expected to take responsibility for planning their transitions and who are trained to engage in self-determination activities early in secondary school have also been shown to take greater responsibility for their lives after school (Malian & Nevin, 2002; Price, Wolensky, & Mulligan, 2002; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

This report, one in a series from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), provides a national picture of the transition planning processes for secondary school youth with disabilities in a single school year. It does not, however, assess the implementation of the transition planning requirements of IDEA '97. NLTS2 findings presented here will be augmented in the next few years as youth, their parents, school staff, and other professionals further develop youth's transition plans and as youth complete their high school careers and participate in their communities as young adults. Future NLTS2 reports will elucidate how the transition services and supports students receive during secondary school affect their transition experiences and their success in the early adult life.

Background on NLTS2

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education is working to provide the information needed to improve the education and outcomes of secondary school students with disabilities, in part through NLTS2. NLTS2 is a 10-year study that is documenting the characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 youth who were ages 13 through 16 and were receiving special education services in grade 7 or above in the 2000-01 school year. NLTS2 findings 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.[1]

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[1] Appendix A provides additional information about the NLTS2 design, methods, and measurement, including definitions of disability categories. Further details, including other NLTS2 reports, are available at www.nlts2.org.

Focus of the Report

Research Questions

This report considers the following questions for secondary-school-age youth with disabilities:

- What are the characteristics of the transition planning process? Specifically:
  - Age of students at initiation of transition planning
  - Participants in transition planning
  - Students' transition goals
  - School-based supports for transition
  - Schools' contacts with agencies and organizations on behalf of transitioning students
  - Postschool service information provided to parents.
- What are the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the suitability and usefulness of the transition planning process?
- How do these factors differ for students with different primary disability classifications and selected demographic characteristics?

Information Sources

These questions are addressed using data collected from parents and from school staff who serve NLTS2 youth. Parents or guardians[2] of NLTS2 study members are a key source of information on the characteristics of students, their educational histories, and their lives outside of school. In addition, parents relay information regarding their participation in and satisfaction with the transition planning process. Telephone interviews conducted with parents in the spring and summer of 2001 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, who were ages 13 through 17 at the time.

In addition to parents, this report relies on information provided by staff in the schools NLTS2 sample members attended. The multipurpose students' school program survey involved mail questionnaires sent in the 2001-02 school year to school staff members identified as those who were most knowledgeable (often special educators) about the overall school programs of individual students; the survey had a response rate of 59%. Responses from these educators provide information about the students' transition goals, the participants in the transition planning process, whether the IEP specifies a course of study to meet the transition goals, the receipt of instruction in transition planning skills, the types of transition services identified as those that students will need after graduation, and the contacts made on behalf of students by schools as part of transition planning.

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[2] For simplicity, parents and guardians are referred to here as "parents."

Technical Notes

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

- **Findings are weighted.** NLTS2 was designed to provide a national picture of the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of youth with disabilities nationally in the NLTS2 age range. Therefore, all the statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates of the national population of youth with disabilities in the NLTS2 age group, as well as each disability category individually. Each response for each sample member is weighted to represent the number of youth nationally that 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 s/he was selected.

- **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 indicate caution is required in interpreting results.

- **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 of fewer than 35 sample members). For example, because of the 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.** In discussions of the descriptive statistics, 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 there as well.

Organization of the Report

The chapters in this report reflect the research questions posed. Chapter 2 describes the transition planning process, including the students' age at initiation, their transition goals, whether they have a prescribed course of study to meet those goals, whether they receive instruction in transition planning, and their role in the planning process. Additionally, the chapter describes participation of parents and school personnel in the transition planning process, the postschool service needs identified for students, and the agencies or organization contacted on behalf of students regarding postschool programs and services. Chapter 3 presents parents' perspectives on the usefulness of the transition planning process and teachers' perceptions of the suitability of the transition goals. Chapter 4 summarizes the emerging themes regarding transition planning that NLTS2 data suggest. Appendix A provides additional information on NLTS2 methodological features. Appendix B describes the individual and household characteristics of students represented in NLTS2, and Appendix C presents the unweighted sample sizes for all data tables and figures in the report.