



Improving Post-High School Outcomes for Transition-Age Students with Disabilities: An Evidence Review

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Executive Summary

Nearly four decades have passed since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensured access to public education for students with disabilities in the United States. During the years following its adoption, there was growing recognition that to lead productive and fulfilling lives as adults, many students need support in the transition from secondary school to post-high school environments. As a result, several reauthorizations of IDEA have emphasized transition planning in helping students with disabilities to obtain employment, pursue postsecondary education and training, and live more independently.

Despite the efforts of policymakers and practitioners, a gap remains between post-high school outcomes of students with disabilities and outcomes for other students. To help close that gap, this report reviews the research literature on programs (strategies, interventions, or sets of services) designed to help students with disabilities make transitions.¹ It deviates in the following ways from previous evidence reviews on this topic (for example, Cobb and Alwell 2009; Test et al. 2009):

- It updates earlier reviews by including studies publicly released between April 2008 and June 2011.
- It reviews studies using the standards and process developed by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) What Works Clearinghouse (WWC).² Applying the WWC standards and procedures meant that we did not include some types of studies that were included in previous reviews.
- It focuses on direct measures of students' post-high school outcomes as evidence of a program's effectiveness.³

These criteria focus the evidence review on research results in which we are most confident, and that can best help us identify programs that are likely to improve the post-high school outcomes of students.

Review methods and results

The research team used the WWC's systematic procedures to guide this review (see Figure 1). Briefly, we first defined which types of studies the evidence review would include, then conducted an initial search for all studies that might be relevant to our topic and

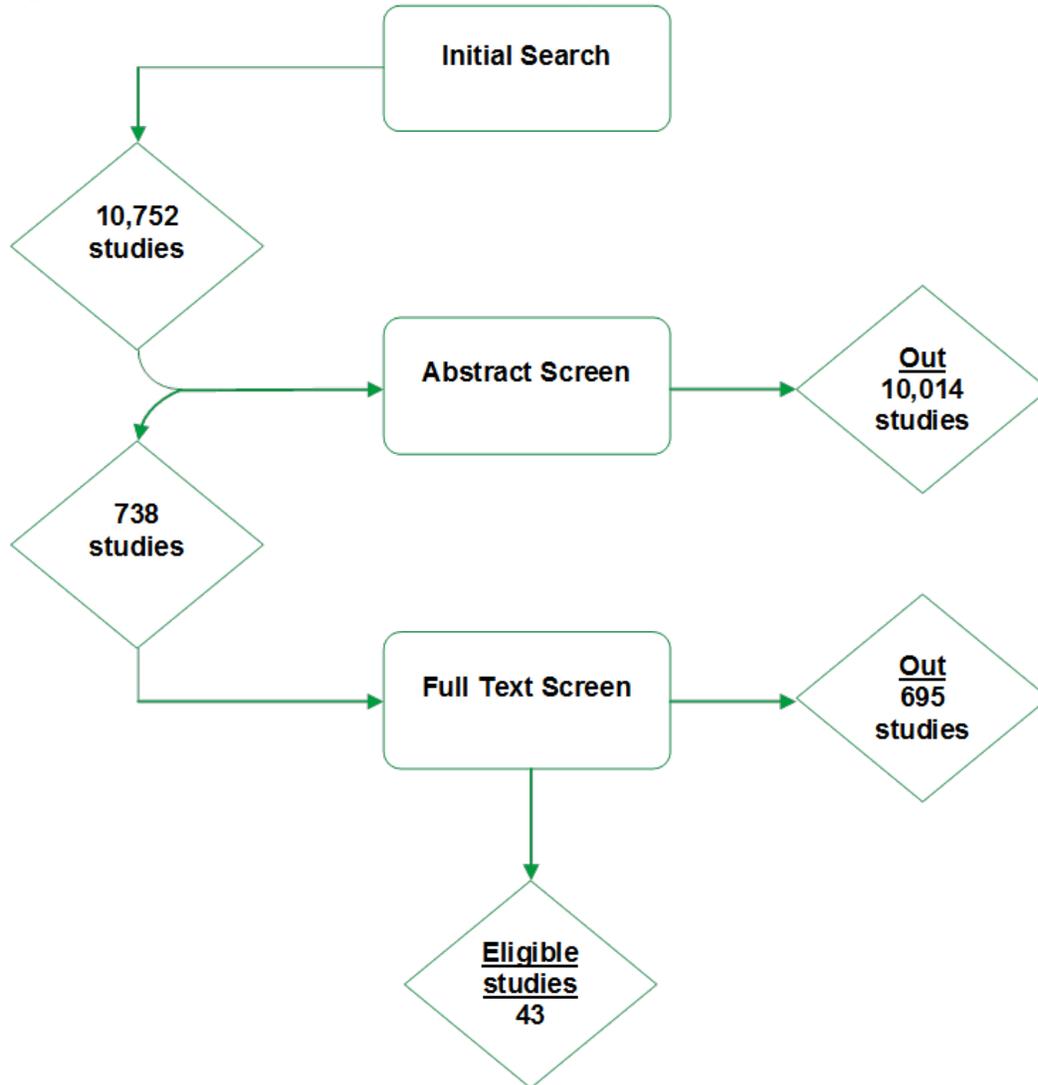
¹ The report is being prepared under ED's contract with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) 2012. NLTS 2012 is the third in a series of data collections to track the characteristics, school experiences, and post-high school outcomes of a cohort of students with disabilities. See <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/nlts/> for more information.

² The research team needed to go beyond the WWC standards and procedures for rating the effectiveness of programs when the evidence included studies that use a type of research design called a single-case design. The WWC has pilot standards for reviewing single-case design studies but has not established a method for combining evidence across studies.

³ Direct measures refer to explicit indicators of employment, postsecondary education and training, and independent living. This review does not include studies using indirect measures of these three outcome domains.

outcomes. Second, using short abstracts for each study, we screened out studies that were clearly ineligible. For the remaining studies, we read the full text of each article or report to determine whether it was eligible for the review. Only eligible studies that met the WWC evidence standards were to be included in the lessons we drew about promising programs.

Figure 1. Summary of the search and screening process



The 43 eligible studies were reviewed and assigned a WWC standards rating. Of this group, 16 studies met the WWC standards, but none at the highest level given to well-implemented studies that use the most rigorous research designs (“without reservations”):

- Of the 16 studies meeting the WWC standards, 13 were single-case design studies in which researchers compare how outcomes change for individual students in response to a program. A total of 42 students, all but 2 of whom had an intellectual disability⁴, participated in these studies, which focused on examining independent living outcomes.
- Three studies used a quasi-experimental design, in which researchers compare outcomes for a group of students participating in a program with the outcomes of a comparison group that was selected to be as similar as possible to the participant group. Approximately 700 students participated in those three studies, which all measured employment outcomes; one of the studies (215 students) also examined postsecondary education outcomes.

Our review of transition research studies from the past two decades indicates that relatively few studies meet the WWC standards for credible evidence of effectiveness. Based on the 16 studies that met WWC standards, the review rated the effectiveness of programs designed to help students with disabilities make transitions to post-high school employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. Community-based work-experience programs were found to have mixed effects on employment outcomes based on a medium-to-large extent of evidence. These programs were found to have potentially positive effects on postsecondary education outcomes, although the extent of evidence was small. Functional life-skills development programs were found to have potentially positive effects on independent living outcomes. But, again, the extent of evidence was small. On the whole, evidence across eight program categories allowed us to review only two of the categories, providing little support from high-quality intervention research for identifying a range of programs to help students with disabilities make successful transitions to employment, postsecondary education and training, or independent living.

Hypotheses for future program development and research

The objective of this review was to draw some tentative lessons about how practitioners might develop successful programs and researchers might improve their investigations of transitions for students with disabilities. But the lack of studies that met the WWC's standards made achieving those objectives challenging. The research team decided to add to the 16 studies that met the WWC standards a set of 8 empirical studies that fell somewhat short of meeting the standards but that we felt could provide exploratory insights.

After examining the methods and results of these studies combined, we offer five hypotheses relevant to program implementation:

⁴ Intellectual disability under IDEA [P.L. 108-448 and P.L. 111-256] refers to significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

1. There are many more programs and bundles of strategies targeting different types of students, as well as greater experience with these programs, than when the earlier literature reviews were conducted.
2. The links between transition program offerings or components may be very important. Different findings for similar programs offered in different ways suggest that, for example, work-experience activities may need to be integrated with career and technical education classes or other aspects of students' educational programs to achieve desired benefits in post-high school outcomes.
3. Participation in career and technical education and or getting a job while in high school may be related to better employment outcomes for students with disabilities.
4. Inclusive education settings in high school may ease the path to postsecondary education.
5. Several strategies, such as computer-based instruction and prompting, may by increasing the functional skills of students with intellectual disabilities help them live more independently.

We suggest some caution in acting on these hypotheses, however, given the design of the studies we drew upon. It is likely that students in the participant groups of the studies were more interested and able to participate in program activities, and therefore more motivated than students in the comparison groups to become employed or enter college. This factor makes it difficult to determine whether the results of the studies reflect the effects of the programs, differences between the groups that existed even before they received the services studied, or some combination of both.

Because of these concerns about study design as well as the lack of studies that met WWC standards, we also offer five recommendations for researchers:

1. Pay greater attention to certain design elements, so that studies can improve their rigor (and therefore meet WWC standards). In particular, we strongly encourage researchers to randomly assign eligible participants into a program and comparison group and to include preprogram measures of all outcomes in the analysis.
2. Collect data on and control for students' "employment while in school" if the study focuses on post-high school employment outcomes. Correlational evidence suggests a positive relationship between having a job while in school and having one after leaving school. Studies that fail to account for in-school employment risk confusing the effects of that experience with the effects of other programs and services.
3. Control for type and severity of disability in the research analysis. As you might expect, these student attributes were the most consistently important in differentiating post-high school results. Although many of the studies we looked at described students using these attributes, the analyses rarely included these variables. Without ensuring that the program and comparison groups are equivalent on these attributes before a program is provided, it is difficult to know

whether differences after the program are due to the program or those pre-existing differences in attributes.

4. Measure post-high school outcomes directly. Many studies did not measure such outcomes. Moreover, the field has not convincingly shown a connection between interim or indirect measures deemed important (for example, self-determination and locus of control) for in-school programs and these later outcomes. We encourage the special education research community to extend its outcome measurement to include actual measures of employment, postsecondary education, or independent living. This approach will authenticate the effects of special school curricula and instruction. Fulfilling this goal is increasingly possible; post-high school outcomes are becoming easier and less costly to obtain. Researchers who convince state and local education officials of the importance of their analyses can access state longitudinal data systems supported by ED grants and perhaps tap other administrative databases (for example, the National Student Clearinghouse for postsecondary enrollment information). IES' National Center for Special Education Research runs various competitions to obtain grant funds for rigorous research including in the area of post-high school transitions.
5. Researchers studying follow-up effects of transition programs should include any information they can access on "treatment integrity" or "treatment fidelity." Such information adds precision to our understanding of why variations in outcome effects may occur across programs that appear to be similar but differ substantially in features or implementation processes.

Fortunately, several important evaluations on the horizon may provide useful information for policymakers and researchers who have an interest in this transition area. These studies of demonstration programs funded by the U.S. Social Security Administration were too early into data collection and analysis to provide information on the effects of the programs on post-high school outcomes. However, we mention them here for several reasons: (a) their designs provide examples of how to do the difficult work of conducting random assignment of students with disabilities and tracking their outcomes in secondary school and beyond; (b) early reports from these projects have also focused on issues of implementation fidelity; and (c) follow-up reports from these large-scale evaluations hold great promise for ascertaining the effects of the program implemented as well as the differential effects of varying components on students with different types of disabilities and in a number of implementation contexts. These types of next-generation research studies in special education transition may inform local policymakers about sequencing and intensity of program components and how these components vary in their effects on different transition outcome domains. These studies, coupled with the existing empirical research base, may also provide transition researchers and program designers with the tools to put together logic models that can clarify the strength and directions of program components and other inputs to different transition outcomes.

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References are listed in several sections. The first section includes references for studies that are cited in the narrative but are not part of the evidence review. References in the next section include studies that are included in the evidence review and meet WWC standards. The final section includes references for studies that do not meet WWC standards. References in the final section that are marked with an asterisk indicate studies that are included in the review as exploratory.

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None.

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