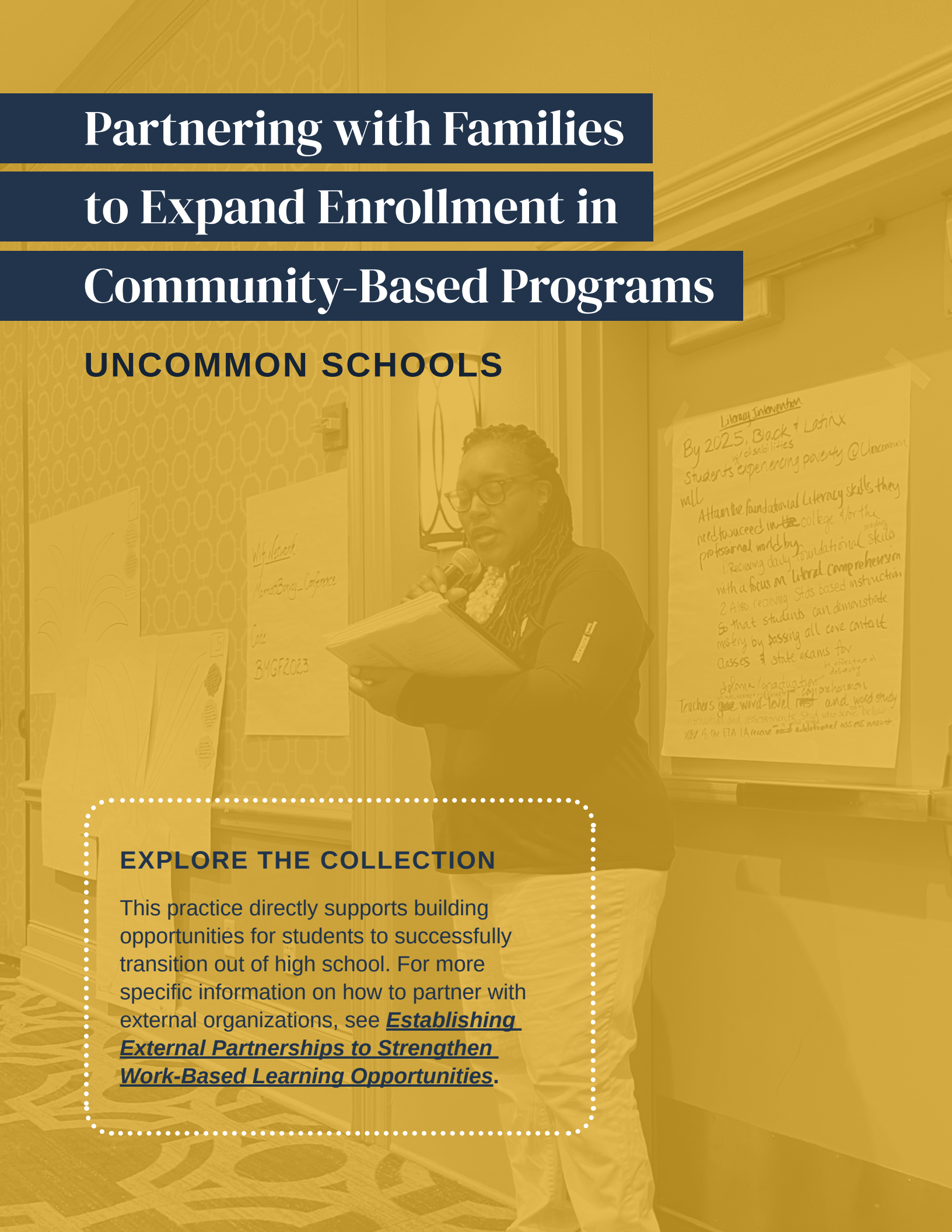
Partnering with Families to Expand Enrollment in Community-Based Programs

UNCOMMON SCHOOLS



EXPLORE THE COLLECTION

This practice directly supports building opportunities for students to successfully transition out of high school. For more specific information on how to partner with external organizations, see ***Establishing External Partnerships to Strengthen Work-Based Learning Opportunities***.

Snapshot

WHAT IS THE PRACTICE?

Educators develop strategic relationships with students, families, and local organizations that provide postsecondary resources to students. Educators can then support and progress-monitor families' submission and completion of applications to the organizations.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- Families need opportunities to learn more about the different supports and resources available for their students after high school.
- Nationally, only about 14% of IEP meetings for students with disabilities who are 14 years and older include a vocational rehabilitation counselor. Another 17% of IEP meetings include someone from a different outside organization.[1]
- Only eight percent of individuals with disabilities in the US who were 16–24 years old applied for vocational rehabilitation services, even though an average of 56% of applicants received services.[2]
- Many families experience significant barriers when applying for and accessing services. By acting as intermediaries, educators can better ensure that students who need and qualify for services receive those services.



"My goal is just to be the person who is the bridge."

— TONYA BALLARD, UNCOMMON SPECIAL EDUCATOR AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

The Challenge

Families need guidance to navigate student enrollment in community-based organizations.

Many students with disabilities need transition services to help them reach their goals after high school. Community-based organizations offer students with disabilities services, including educational day programs, job training programs, and support for instructional accommodations for college students. For many students, these services are essential for their successful transition out of high school. Families do not always have the time to get all the information they need about community-based organizations and make the connections themselves. Unfortunately, these organizations can also be mired in bureaucracy and difficult to navigate. Families can struggle with different steps required for enrollment in a program:

- Understanding program eligibility criteria (e.g., income level, disability type, or service needs)
- Completing initial applications
- Submitting required documentation (e.g., income verification, documentation of disability, or IEP)
- Participating in intake interviews
- Attending meetings to develop a service plan for the individual student

For North Star Academy Lincoln Park High School (LPHS) in Newark, NJ, connecting students with disabilities and their families with these organizations is key to helping students reach their postsecondary goals. Uncommon Schools has always worked to connect students and families with community-based organizations that provide services to students after high school, but they did not have a clear process and set of resources to support case managers and college and career counselors in making these connections.

Tonya Ballard, in her roles as special education instructional leader and part-time career and college readiness teacher, worked with a diverse set of stakeholders from the network: Joe Frick, Uncommon's career and technical education manager; Alex Walker, college counselor; Roydon Pellew, alumni success counselor; Meghan Fitzgerald, cross-regional manager of special education; and other members of the Uncommon team. Together, the group brainstormed solutions and identified a clear starting point — enrollment in the Division of Vocational and Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) — to develop a process that could be replicated across schools and programs in the network to strategically use resources to meet the needs of students and families.



Uncommon's Continuum of Postsecondary Readiness Supports for All Students

Enabling Conditions

Enabling Conditions describes the minimum conditions needed for successful implementation, including resources, mindsets, staffing, and recommended time allocation.

Prerequisites	★ Systemwide commitment to alternative pathways ★ Network-level support for the exploration and systematization of resources for postsecondary transition
Recommended Materials	★ Data systems that help track student goals and progress for postsecondary transition that are integrated into existing platforms ★ Guidance for postsecondary and special educators on transition for students with disabilities
Staff Commitment	★ Staffing for seminar classes for all students ★ Postsecondary staff with special education knowledge
Recommended Time Allocation	★ Training of postsecondary staff on transition for students with disabilities (1–2 hr. per year) ★ Collaborative meetings between school-based special education case managers (1 hr. per month) ★ Meetings between network-level postsecondary and special education teams (1 hr. per month)



The Practice

Working Directly with Community-Based Organizations To Support Families

After bringing the team together to unpack the challenge and consider solutions, Tonya set out to create a process that could be the bridge between community organizations, like DVRS, and the students they aimed to serve. Tonya's first step was to research local organizations in order to connect students and their families with services that could help them long after they graduate. Being the link between families and external organizations meant that Tonya, as the students' case manager and college and career counselor, was responsible for making these connections and functioned as the families' point person at school.

To better support students and families with the application process, Tonya knew she would need to fully understand DVRS and the steps to apply. She reviewed their website, reached out to Joe and other colleagues who had experience working with DVRS or similar organizations, and made a list of questions she could not easily answer through research. Next, Tonya established contact with a point person at DVRS, from whom she was able to gather information about the program and a **host of services** they provide, including:

- vocational counseling and guidance;
- adaptive driver training;
- work readiness;
- training, including tuition, related fees, and required textbooks, for vocations and college;
- tutor, reader, and note-taker services;
- job development and placement; and
- job coaching.

Tonya's contact directed her to DVRS's online enrollment information. She then sent the **application** to all her students' families with a message emphasizing the importance of applying while students are still in high school. By applying, students could find out more about what DVRS provides, learn how to fully enroll in the program, and even begin receiving services.

At least one student's family began applying to DVRS in response to Tonya's email. When the family hit a roadblock in understanding how to complete their application process, they reached out to Tonya for help. Together, Tonya and the family finished the application, which allowed Tonya the opportunity to develop stronger bonds with the family and learn the process deeply.

Regional Service Organizations that Provide Postsecondary Services

Every state has its own programs that provide **vocational rehabilitation services** to individuals with disabilities using federal funding authorized by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Uncommon's **transition handbook** explains that "the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) works with students who have disabilities, including those with a 504 Plan or other documented disability that impedes a student's ability to succeed in competitive employment." Uncommon also works with **Acces-VR** to connect their students attending schools in New York State with these same services. These state-run programs are essential service providers for individuals with disabilities after high school.

As soon as the student and their family started having meetings with staff from DVRS, Tonya asked to join. As a result of Tonya's strong relationship with the student and their family, everyone was eager to have Tonya join as an important member of the team. By joining the student's meetings with DVRS, Tonya strengthened her connection with the DVRS support provider and deepened her understanding of what families experience when they enroll in DVRS programming.

Inspired by her success with the first family, Tonya asked to be included in meetings with all of the other students from her school to whom she had recommended DVRS, so that she could similarly support their transitions from high school to life after high school. Fortunately, the application for vocational rehabilitation services in New Jersey provides a location for the name and contact information of the applicant's special education teacher. Providing this information gave DVRS authorization to communicate with students' special educators and removed the need to have families sign an additional form to consent to this contact.

Tonya also had families add her as a contact in all their email communications with DVRS. This allowed Tonya to reach out to the assigned DVRS counselors, give them background on her role, and ask for any paperwork she could support students to complete. In this way, Tonya could track the documents and steps each student and their family needed to complete and help make sure all the materials were submitted. Acting in this role further fostered Tonya's trusted relationships, allowing her to continue supporting families. The importance of Uncommon's investment in Tonya's role as a career and college counselor and point of contact for her students' families cannot be understated.



How Uncommon Implemented the Practice

Over time, Tonya devised a set of steps to use throughout the year to increase the impact of the practice.

Step 1: Develop Relationships with Families

- Better understand families by inviting them to school events that allow for personal interactions.
- Start building trust with families as their point person by providing them with information through workshops.

Step 2: Connect with Community-Based Organizations

- Research community-based organizations, both public and private.
- Use existing relationships to build new connections with organizations and individuals at the organizations.
- Determine whether there are opportunities for students to receive community-based supports on campus.
- Confer with established internal supports about community-based organizations.

Step 3: Coordinate Materials

- Understand the steps and requirements that families will need to satisfy to complete applications.
- Identify barriers families may encounter when completing requirements.
- Ensure families provide consent for communication between the school and the organization.

Step 4: Support Students and Families with Requirements

- Assign the completion of applications to students as homework.
- Hold in-person workshops for families to get support completing applications.
- Create a way of tracking the completion of steps and applications (e.g., application complete, application submitted, intake meeting held, services offered).

Step 5: Follow Up After Application

- Regularly follow up with families who do not submit materials.
- Connect with organizations to maintain relationships.
- Document successful strategies and useful materials.

At the same time Tonya was gaining knowledge about DVRS, she was also collaborating with the special education and college and career readiness teams to create quarterly workshops for families. These sessions let families learn about specific programs that support students with disabilities and meet Uncommon staff members and outside organizations who are resources to them and their students. These activities strengthened families' trust in their students' teacher, taught them new information, and helped facilitate future interactions with key personnel.

"Unlike in primary school where students have a main teacher parents can contact, there are several departments, teachers, and supports in high school, so parents may not know who to address. I was their one-stop shop to what our school and community has to offer."

— TONYA BALLARD, UNCOMMON SPECIAL EDUCATOR AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

A Sample of Quarterly Family Workshops

Tonya and the college and career readiness team developed a sequence of four workshops that counselors or case managers can host throughout the school year.

QUARTER 1: SEPTEMBER

Topics include collaborating with my young adult in finalizing their transition plan; an explanation of the curriculum/transition process for each quarter; documentation that families should gather; and key online systems, including PowerSchool, YouScience, Overgrad, Common App, and FAFSA.

QUARTER 2: NOVEMBER

Topics include completing the FAFSA; making early decisions for the college process; finding a mentorship, internship, job, or portfolio, depending on the transition plan; financing college; updating Overgrad.

QUARTER 3: MARCH

Topics include summer program applications, scholarships, preparing for the next grade/retention conversations, spring break ideas, and DVRS sign-up.

QUARTER 4: MAY

Topics include preparing for end-of-year activities (e.g., graduation, field trips, ceremonies, meetings) and scholarships.

The Impact

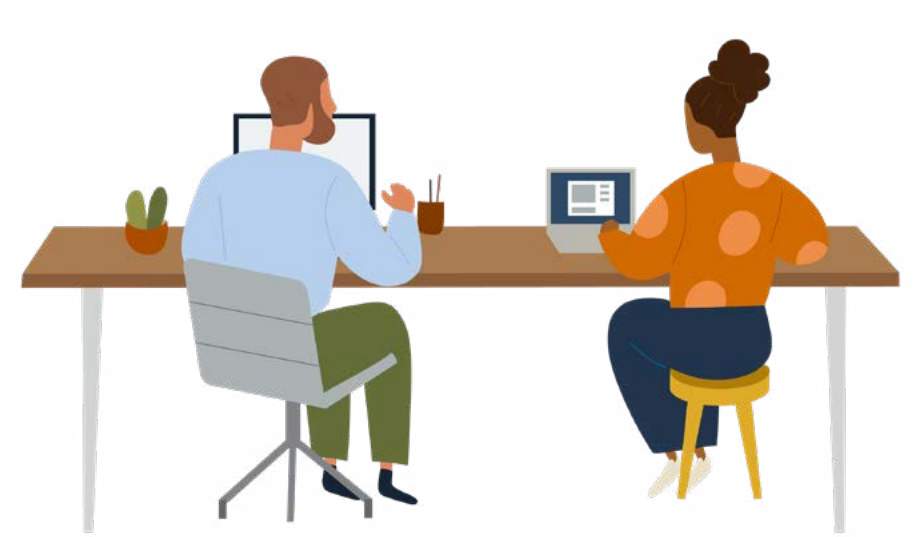
Learning and Codifying Lessons to Expand this Practice

As Tonya has continued to work to connect families to community-based organizations, she has discovered strategies to increase the number of students applying to programs. One strategy she has employed is making applications into homework assignments for students to complete. She uploads the applications to a Google Classroom that students and families can access. She has also found that it is very important to continue to follow up with families who do not at first complete applications. By keeping track of these families and connecting with them repeatedly, Tonya is able to build a more trusting relationship with them as they see how reliable and supportive she is. Her persistent follow-up also helps her discover the barriers that arise for families, which she can work to mitigate in future years.

Tonya has been able to use her knowledge and experience with this practice to create a guide for special educators and college and career counselors throughout the Uncommon Schools network. In the guide, educators can access information, structures, and materials from the work that Tonya, the special education team, and the college and career readiness team developed and expanded upon during the team's engagement in the NIC, so all Uncommon families of students with disabilities can be connected with organizations that provide important resources for their students. As a result, Uncommon has been able to increase the capacity of special educators and college and career readiness counselors and build partnerships with local organizations and guest speakers to broaden the array of career opportunities students can access.

Common Barriers and Solutions

Barrier	Solution
Students and families do not understand the student's disability and services needed.	Lessons provided on disability- and self-awareness
Students and families do not have access to a printer at home.	Applications printed at school
Students lose the applications.	Applications remain at school unless taken home to complete a specific task. Completed applications are mailed directly from school.
Students do not have important information (e.g., social security number, home address, parent information).	Case managers have families provide all necessary information for applications at family workshops.



To learn more about how external transition services can help you improve learning outcomes for students with disabilities, see *Establishing External Partnerships to Strengthen Work-Based Learning Opportunities*.

***Uncommon Schools** serves approximately 19,000 students in grades K–12 across New York City, Rochester, NY, Camden, NJ, Newark, NJ, and Roxbury, MA. Focal schools participating in the Networked Improvement Community included Uncommon Charter High School in Brooklyn, NY, and North Star Academy Lincoln Park High School (LPHS) in Newark, NJ.*

*Uncommon Schools is a part of the **Marshall Street Networked Improvement Community,** a three-year intentional community of 10 public charter school networks nationwide aiming to make dramatic gains for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. Collectively, the 10 networks identified over 20 best practices that improve learning outcomes and school culture for students positioned furthest from opportunity. Learn more here.*

Notes

1 Cameto et al., *Transition Planning*

2 Honeycutt et al., “State Differences”

Bibliography

Cameto, Renee, Phyllis Levine, and Mary Wagner. *Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities: A Special Topic Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2).* National Center for Special Education Research (2004).

Honeycutt, Todd, Allison Thompkins, Maura Bardos, and Steven Stern. “State Differences in the Vocational Rehabilitation Experiences of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities.” *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 42, no. 1 (2015): 17–30.