Marshall Street

Overview

IGNITING POSTSECONDARY ASPIRATIONS

A collection of research-to-impact practices developed with the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities

COLLECTION OVERVIEW

Igniting Postsecondary Aspirations

Introduction

The Challenge

Postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities lag behind those of their peers.

Public schools across America struggle to meet the diverse needs of students, particularly those furthest from opportunity. When marginalization intersects with disability, students often face low expectations, are systematically segregated, are denied access to college and career curricula, and do not receive sufficient support to obtain a high school diploma and pursue their postsecondary goals.[1] Ensuring that students have the necessary skills to successfully transition into adulthood after high school — whether to 2- or 4-year college, workforce development, employment, the military, or community living — is an essential goal for schools. Unfortunately, people with disabilities between the ages of 14 and 64 are considerably less likely than people without disabilities to be employed, to both enroll in and complete postsecondary education programs, and to live independently.[2] **In 2023, only 37.1% of people with disabilities were employed; the same year, of people without disabilities, 75.0% were employed.**[3] Despite requirements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to center Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) on postsecondary education, employment, and community living goals for students 16 years and older,[4] schools continue to struggle to make sure students are achieving those goals.

Competing priorities reduce opportunities for students with disabilities to learn necessary skills.

While college enrollment after graduation continues to be an important focus for high schools, the explicit teaching of postsecondary skills is also necessary for ensuring students with disabilities experience success in college, a career, the military, or in their community once they leave high school. The focus of many high schools on college enrollment after graduation for all students has made it

difficult for special education programs to teach postsecondary skills. As a result, there is limited time during the school day for special educators to teach postsecondary employment and community living skills when schools focus solely on college preparation.[5] Students receive college readiness activities through college preparation programs (e.g., seminars, advisory, or college counseling), but additional time is necessary to support students with the development of employment and community living skills.[6] When school goals don't align with the goals of students and families, it is difficult to provide students with disabilities opportunities to gain the skills necessary for successful postsecondary transitions.

Schools do not invest in the staffing necessary to create diverse postsecondary opportunities for students.

Even when schools are interested in providing a diverse range of opportunities for students to reach their postsecondary goals, they often lack the necessary infrastructure and relationships.[7] Schools may want to make more opportunities available for students with disabilities to learn postsecondary skills, particularly through work-based learning opportunities, but they do not invest in staff who can develop relationships with external organizations, businesses, and programs. There must be staff with dedicated time for building connections with programs[8] in a variety of industries so that students can build skills regardless of the type of goal they have. In addition, schools need to ensure that students with moderate to severe disabilities are sufficiently supported when engaging in activities outside the school building in the same way they would be supported in school.[9] Currently, not enough schools are investing in their goal to provide students with diverse postsecondary transition learning opportunities so that students with disabilities can experience the same successful outcomes as their peers.[10]

Our Approach

Experiential and work-based learning opportunities are necessary for students with disabilities to learn the skills required for successful postsecondary transitions. **Existing research demonstrates that when students with disabilities engage in career and technical education programs, they are more likely to graduate from high school, earn an industry certification,[11] and be employed[12] after graduation.** By creating postsecondary pathways aligned with student goals and giving students real-world opportunities in those pathways, students can be better prepared for life after high school.

The implementation of effective postsecondary programming and support is essential to the NIC's aim of systematically improving the way our education system serves Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. To close the research-to-practice gap, the NIC explored and developed a set of accessible and effective interventions to accelerate choice-filled postsecondary pathways for students. At the foundation of these interventions are the following guiding principles.

Working with external organizations ensures students can pursue the pathway of their choice.

Postsecondary transition programming needs to be designed so that, regardless of disability, students can choose their postsecondary goals and have a variety of ways to work toward those goals. Every student should be able to pursue their pathway of interest. This is particularly important for students with moderate to severe disabilities, who have long been denied self-determination of their future.[13]

Partnering with community-based organizations is a necessity for providing students with a variety of postsecondary readiness opportunities. Schools have to invest in hiring staff who can maintain relationships between the school and community-based organizations; conduct ongoing research into programs and potential partners, including making contact, acquiring information, and visiting locations; develop and maintain a collaborative process for the program; and coordinate information-sharing across various stakeholder groups (e.g., students, families, postsecondary teams, and IEP teams).

Engaging in inter-agency collaboration (e.g., collaboration between schools and the state department of rehabilitation), as **Uncommon Schools** did while in the NIC, has proven to result in improved outcomes for students with disabilities, including increases in both postsecondary employment and enrollment in postsecondary education programs.[14] Services — such as pre-employment training, job placements, and workplace accommodations — are often essential for students with moderate to severe disabilities once they complete high school and lose services they have relied on for years.

Mastery Schools, while engaged in the NIC, was able to develop new partnerships with external organizations and thus increase the number of pathways available to their students with and without disabilities. For schools to provide a range of opportunities and support in all students' chosen pathways — as **Mastery** and **Uncommon** did — they need to be dedicated to developing relationships with external partners and organizations.

Engaging key stakeholders ensures students have a team supporting their transition.

Engaging key stakeholders, including those who can continue to support students after graduation, is central to ensuring postsecondary long-term success for students with disabilities. Families are particularly important partners because students often need parents' or guardians' information to qualify for programs. Educators can intentionally serve as liaisons and coordinators to help families who qualify for services to:

- understand program eligibility criteria (e.g., income verification, documentation of disability, or service needs),
- complete initial applications,
- submit required documentation,
- participate in intake interviews, and
- attend meetings to develop service plans.

While in the NIC, **Uncommon** solidified a process for engaging families throughout the school year to support student enrollment in postsecondary services at community-based organizations. Connecting families with the organizations was important for the students in Uncommon's self-contained program because they and their families often depend on higher-level and longer-term services more than students who are fully included in the general education setting.

Collaboration among school-based stakeholders, including special education case managers, transition coordinators, and college counselors, is also critical for supporting students in choosing and pursuing the right postsecondary pathway. When postsecondary transition teams are composed of a diverse set of staff members with various knowledge and viewpoints, team members can each give input, focus on students' interests, integrate family preferences, and mitigate potential biases that can unintentionally

direct our priority population to less lucrative or lower-status occupations. **Uncommon** built structures for regular collaboration between their career and college success coaches, alumni success coaches, and special education team members to ensure the engagement of students with disabilities in postsecondary planning throughout high school and after graduation.

Using data regularly enables teams to assess and monitor students' transition progress.

Regularly reviewing data on student progress toward postsecondary goals and providing interventions when needed increases the number of students who successfully complete their postsecondary pathways. Team members at NIC schools updated data as they interacted with students so that their teams understood students' current performance. Data on student attendance, grades, behavior, and home life, considered alongside data on progress toward postsecondary goals, helped teams to support students more efficiently. **Mastery Schools** accomplished this by refining meetings between the postsecondary team, special education case managers, and social workers to regularly collect and monitor data on students' progress toward their transition goals. By reviewing this data at least biweekly, **Mastery's** team could respond promptly to student needs rather than waiting for students to fall behind. Schools also used this data to determine whether all students with disabilities were accessing transition opportunities, not just students with mild disabilities or those pursuing more traditional pathways.

Enabling Conditions

Each of the practices in this collection strengthens postsecondary transition planning and services to improve outcomes for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. **The effective implementation of these practices was made possible because of three core enabling conditions that were in place in NIC members' schools: strong transition plans, collaboration time with stakeholders, and dedicated staffing.** Without these three conditions, the practices' impact is dramatically reduced.

Clear, Measurable, and Attainable Transition Plans

All students with disabilities ages 16 or older must have transition plans with a goal in each of the following: postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Some states and localities require transition plans as part of the IEP when students are 14 years old. Clear transition plans that are developed with the students' and families' input are essential for schools to create and implement effective transition programming. Student interviews, career interest surveys, transcript audits, and parent interviews are examples of ways that educators can collect data to help determine what students' IEP transition goals will be.

Like academic goals, transition goals need to be measurable and attainable for students. It is especially important for transition goals and related activities to be aligned with the language used by the school so that all educators and administrators can clearly understand how students' goals fit with existing structures. Nevertheless, students' goals should be based on what is best for each student, not on what is best for the school. In some cases, students' IEP goals will require schools to develop new

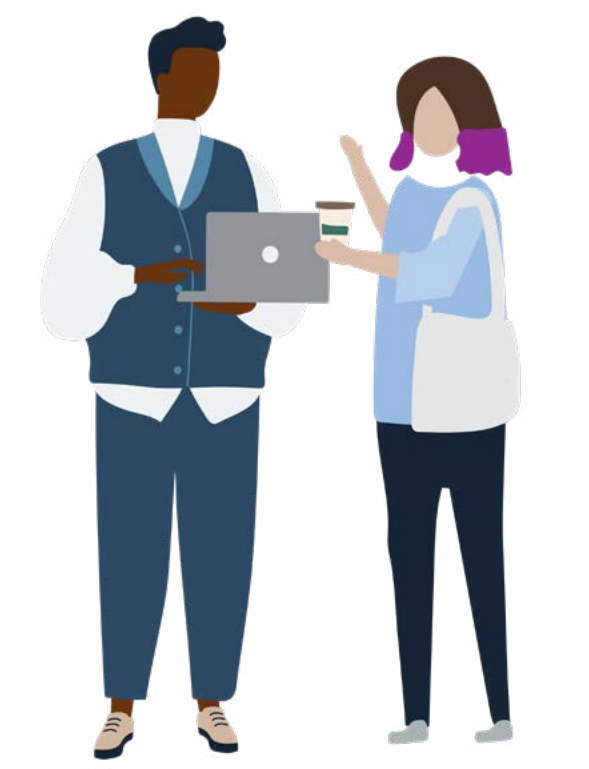
programming, some of which is described in this collection, to meet individual student needs. Clearly stated transition goals and goal-aligned activities can help schools shape their postsecondary transition programs to better meet the needs of all students.

Dedicated Time for Stakeholder Collaboration

For successful implementation of the transition best practices described in this collection, educators leading the transition practices need dedicated time to collaborate with fellow educators, students, and community-based organizations. Both before those meetings and after, educators need time to work directly with students on their transition activities, assess and document progress toward transition requirements, visit students at work-based learning sites, and enact additional support for students who are off track toward their transition goals. Finally, at least one staff member needs dedicated time to communicate and interact with community-based organizations to build and maintain relationships so that students have access to important resources and programming. **Mastery** was able to create these structures with biweekly team meetings that were led by a dedicated transition coordinator who kept the team accountable.

Dedicated Staffing

Transition programs are strengthened when staffing allows a dedicated educator to monitor, develop, and support transition services for students with disabilities. Having a staff member focused on ensuring that every student successfully transitions to the postsecondary programming of their choice is key to improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Case managers can write transition plans for students' IEPs, and special education teachers can teach skills or collaborate with advisors or seminar teachers to ensure students learn skills in school. However, a strong transition program requires solid relationships with community-based organizations, which takes significant time and effort that needs to be dedicated to those tasks. Both **Mastery** and **Uncommon** devoted resources so that individuals at the school and network levels could support the further development of external partnerships and ensure staff collaboration between general and special education within their schools and networks. These staff members were integral to the implementation of their transition programs.



The Collection

This collection includes **three best practices** that support the education of students with disabilities on behalf of improving their postsecondary outcomes, and **two case studies** on additional ways to ensure that students and families are able to access postsecondary resources.

Each of the practices detailed in this book is an independently strong and valuable practice. However, each practice is most effective when built on a programmatic foundation that provides opportunities for academic learning, disability-related skill development, and postsecondary transition experiences.



The audience for this collection is educators, schools, and districts who believe that all students are capable of achieving the postsecondary goals of their choosing, who fundamentally believe that it is the system's responsibility to ensure this is a reality for all students it serves, and who are looking for ideas on how to initiate or refine their approach to this work. While a great many research papers, reports, and technical assistance centers provide guidance on postsecondary transition, this collection is unique:

- It ties together the multiple elements critical to addressing the postsecondary transition needs of all students and specifically those of Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty.
- It emphasizes the importance of using data at all levels of the school system and of engaging individuals from all levels of the school system.
- Each chapter is grounded in both the foundational and current research on the practice but emphasizes (1) detailed, real-world examples of the practice as implemented in secondary schools and classrooms within the NIC and (2) a step-by-step guide to the implementation of the practice.

Chapter 1: Building School-Based Transition Teams to Accelerate Student Progress Toward Postsecondary Goals

Schools should monitor transition progress in the same way they monitor other student outcomes so that teams can intervene and adapt support for students when data indicates it is necessary. Postsecondary and transition teams need to regularly review data and make decisions on how best to support students throughout the year in order to ensure all students achieve their postsecondary goals. This chapter describes how schools can create regular meeting structures so that school staff who work with students on their postsecondary goals can collaborate and monitor student progress.

Chapter 2: Establishing External Partnerships to Strengthen Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Typical dual enrollment programs allow students to receive high school credit while taking college courses. States like Pennsylvania allow students to receive high school credit while also meeting requirements for college, certification, licensing, or other pathways students may choose to enroll in after high school. To be successful, dual enrollment requires strong partnerships with external organizations or institutions, both public and private, to provide students a variety of choices for pursuing their postsecondary pathways. This chapter provides a guide to creating a dual enrollment program, describes the staff and additional resources necessary for its successful implementation, and outlines steps to create and maintain new external partnerships with community-based organizations.

Chapter 3: Providing Summer Transition Programming for Postsecondary Success

When students are unable to secure a placement in a postsecondary institution (e.g., college, workplace, workforce training center, community living, or the military) before graduation, intensive support during the summer after graduation can help those students meet their postsecondary goals. Counselors, working with students 1:1 and in small groups, can ensure that students are completing the steps necessary to secure a postsecondary placement by the end of summer. This chapter outlines how to develop such a summer program, including sample weekly schedules for counselors and an explanation of how to develop a summer transition plan for students.

Case Study: Partnering with Families to Expand Enrollment in Community-Based Programs

To ensure students' successful transition out of high school, schools and educators often need to engage directly with families in the steps necessary to obtain the continuing support and services students need. Many families require explicit directions and detailed information about opportunities for their children, as well as regular follow-up to ensure they are meeting application deadlines and are able to get all the necessary documentation. This case study explains the steps that schools or educators can use to help families enroll in community-based programs, particularly those provided by the Division of Vocational and Rehabilitation Services. These steps can apply to any external program and can help schools build stronger relationships with families.

Case Study: Developing Relationships Between Students and Alumni Success Coaches

Counselors who support students after graduation need to understand the unique needs of students with disabilities in order to properly support this population. In addition, students in separate classroom settings need opportunities to build deep, trusting relationships with these counselors in order for students to accept and use the support offered. This case study describes how one network met both needs by creating structures for collaboration between counselors and special educators, which led to students with disabilities better understanding the different staff members helping them reach their postsecondary goals. Though not all schools have the alumni success coaches described in the case study, the lessons offered in this chapter can be applied widely to collaborative activities between special educators and college or school counselors.

How to Approach this Collection

The pieces in this collection can be read in any order, as one is not necessarily dependent on another. Chapters are written to help the reader replicate the practices in their own context. Case studies can be read to inspire ideas but will not necessarily give the depth needed to implement the practice.

Further Reading

A Transition Guide to Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students and Youth with Disabilities
The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, US Department of Education

IEP Transition Planning Checklists for Educators
Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

A Guide for Teachers/Educators for Collaborating with Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Youth with Disabilities
The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition

Appendix

Notes

1 Rowjewski et al., “Effects of Inclusion on Postsecondary Education Outcomes”; Shifrer, *Stigma of a Label; Shifrer et al, Equity or Marginalization?*

2 Newman et al, “National Longitudinal Transition Study”

3 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Persons with a Disability

4 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

5 Cease-Cook et al, “Work-Based Learning Experiences”

6 Mazzotti et al, “Predictors of Postsecondary Success”

7 Plotner, “Professional Characteristics that Impact Perceptions”

8 Scholl & Mooney, “Work-Based Learning Programs”

9 Kittelman et al., “Strategies to Support Work-Based Learning”

10 Moran, “Federal Coordination for Better Transition”

11 Dougherty et al, “Impact of Career and Technical Education”

12 Theobald et al, “Career and Technical Education”; Wagner et al, “Benefits of High School Career and Technical Education”

13 Brock et al., “Self Determination and Agency for All”

14 Kohler et al., *Taxonomy for Transition Programming*

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