Marshall Street

Conclusion

IGNITING POSTSECONDARY ASPIRATIONS

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

Conclusion

Preparing students with the necessary skills to transition successfully into adulthood after high school — whether they're entering 2- or 4-year colleges, workforce development programs, employment, the military, or community living — is a critical objective for schools. Unfortunately, to date, individuals with disabilities aged 14 to 64 are significantly less likely than those without disabilities to secure employment, enroll in and complete postsecondary education, and live independently.[1] While high schools traditionally emphasize college enrollment post-graduation, it is equally vital for schools to explicitly teach postsecondary skills to ensure that students with disabilities succeed no matter their preferred postsecondary pathway. Research indicates that participation in career and technical education programs increases the likelihood of high school graduation, attainment of industry certifications, and post-graduation employment for students with disabilities.[2] Aligning postsecondary pathways with student goals and providing real-world opportunities within these pathways enhances students' readiness for life after high school.[3]

Over the course of three years, the Marshall Street Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities (NIC) saw teachers and leaders from 10 participating public charter networks implement, study, and adjust various best practices for improving outcomes for Black and Latinx students with disabilities who are experiencing poverty. This collection — itself an outcome of the work these schools have done — describes some of the strongest of these practices, focusing specifically on how participating schools improved choice-filled transition planning and programming. It highlights three best practices: **school-based transition teams, external partnerships for work-based learning,** and **summer transition programming**. There are also two case studies, one focusing on how educators at Uncommon Schools use strategic relationships with families to expand enrollment in community-based programs and another on how Uncommon Schools focused on building relationships between special education staff and college and career readiness teams to improve alumni success coaches' understanding of students' individual postsecondary needs, allowing them to support students after graduation more effectively.



The practices that the participating schools utilized over the lifespan of the NIC significantly improved postsecondary outcomes for the population of students they were targeting. For example, **Mastery School's Simon Gratz High School** developed and expanded dual enrollment programming to allow students to gain work experience and learn life skills with local organizations while also earning credit. Mastery Gratz also created school-based transition teams to monitor and support students as they met milestones toward postsecondary pathway enrollment. This combination of practices increased the percentage of students with disabilities who were engaged in their chosen postsecondary pathway after graduation between 2019 and 2022 from 53% to 77% — a number that increased to 95% one year after graduation in 2023. Two years earlier, the summer after returning to in-person learning following the pandemic, the Gratz team implemented structured summer programming to support transitions out of high school, including a three-day boot camp and individualized student coaching. These actions led to 80% of students enrolling in their postsecondary pathway in what otherwise would have been a very challenging year.

Key Takeaways

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO PURSUE A CHOICE-FILLED PATHWAY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL.

While college has traditionally been seen as the ideal postsecondary pathway, this assumption has evolved over the last decade.[4] More and more young people are electing to pursue diverse postsecondary next steps across college, career, and community pathways. High schools need to prepare students to achieve their secondary goals by implementing outcomes-oriented transition programs that reflect high expectations for students with disabilities regardless of the pathway students may choose. To shift mindsets about successful postsecondary transition, schools must embrace inclusivity, recognizing that success extends beyond traditional college routes. This includes developing tools, resources, and cross-functional teams to proactively support transition planning for all students, particularly those with disabilities.

RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION PROGRAM REQUIRES DEDICATED STAFF TO LEAD AND OVERSEE THIS WORK.

Schools with the most successful transition programs in the NIC recognize that effective support requires a comprehensive approach that plans for the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. These schools made a significant financial investment in staffing to ensure that someone could devote most or all of their time to focusing on students' success after high school. This investment allowed dedicated staff to develop meaningful relationships with students, understand their goals and unique needs, manage program logistics, and forge external connections with community organizations, resulting in successful postsecondary outcomes for students. To streamline the process, both Mastery and Uncommon utilized existing structures and expanded them to accommodate students with disabilities. This integration ensured that transition support for students with disabilities became part of the school's overall framework.

CHOICE-FILLED TRANSITION PATHWAYS REQUIRE PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS STAKEHOLDERS.

For students to access the postsecondary pathway of their choosing, stakeholders must collaborate to fill in gaps in the system and to educate students and families about the options available to them. Students and their families are often navigating these transitions for the first time and need schools to serve as a bridge between them and external partners (e.g., 2- and 4-year colleges, apprenticeship programs, or community agencies) to learn about, apply to, and complete enrollment in these pathway programs. Partnerships among students and their families, school and district staff and teams, and relevant community organizations facilitate information sharing, the navigation of bureaucracies, and essential progress monitoring to enhance student postsecondary prospects. Both Mastery and Uncommon had cross-departmental transition teams that included counselors, transition coordinators, and other key school-based staff, as well as thoughtful communication strategies to engage regularly with students, families, and outside organization.

THE FREQUENT AND CONSISTENT USE OF DATA IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION PROGRAMMING.

Regularly reviewing student progress data towards postsecondary goals, along with timely interventions, significantly increases the likelihood of students successfully completing their chosen postsecondary pathways. A proactive data-driven approach allows educators to track student progress, identify challenges early on, and provide targeted support, ultimately maximizing students' chances of achieving their postsecondary aspirations.

All students, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or ability, deserve to choose the life they want to lead.

Schools are responsible for doing everything in their power to give their students that choice, especially their students positioned furthest from opportunity, at the intersection of race, class, and ability. Simply creating an IEP that includes a transition goal is not enough. If it were, we would not see the gaps in college and career attainment that currently exist in the United States. The practices laid out in this collection highlight some of the ways that schools in the NIC changed the landscape of possibilities for their students with disabilities. Schools must ensure they are not creating two realities: one for white, non-disabled students and one for marginalized students. Establishing a strong system of support for postsecondary transitions is one way to do so.

Appendix

Notes

1 Postsecondary National Policy Institute, “Students with Disabilities in Higher Education”

2 Mazzotti et al. “Secondary Transition Predictors”

3 Cease-Cook, Fowler, and Test, “Strategies for Creating Work-Based Learning Experiences”

4 National Center for Education Statistics, “Total Undergraduate Fall Enrollment”

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