

# Communities at the Center: Increasing Access to College and Career for Young People with Disabilities



# Background Research

Recent statistics cite that nearly one million Arizonans have a documented disability. According to the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, approximately 60,000 children have a developmental disability (Bang, 2016). Every year, over 6,000 Arizona youth with a disability experience secondary transitioning from high school to adulthood and higher education or the workforce (IDEA, 2020). Among these 6,000 youth with a disability, in particular youth with autism, an intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities are the least likely to experience support for postsecondary engagement (i.e. college, training, or employment) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In fact, less than a third of youth with autism and multiple disabilities take a college entrance exam or gain workforce development or job experience while in high school. Moreover, parents of youth with autism and multiple disabilities are underequipped to communicate expectations of postsecondary engagement. While the process of transitioning from high school to postsecondary engagement is often facilitated and supported by a transition plan with the school or through the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP), structural education opportunity gaps and workforce entry barriers disproportionately affect equitable access to socioeconomic inclusion for youth with disabilities, and especially youth with developmental disabilities.

This overview of insights identifies three conditions affecting the socioeconomic inclusion of students and youth with disabilities. One, Arizona’s current state of education reveals several gaps and challenges in accessing equitable opportunities to transition to postsecondary engagement. These gaps and challenges derive from structural inequities, progress measurement, and access to vocational learning and Career and Technical Education (CTE) as a proven program of success. Two, youth with disabilities experience heightened challenges in accessing and experiencing an inclusive recruitment process and work environment that can both meet their needs and help them thrive. Three, several programs and policies exist, yet need expansion, that champion the socioeconomic inclusion of young people with disabilities in educational and work spaces. While these programs and policies may exist at varying levels of government or across different states and regions, Arizona has the opportunity to revisit or reimagine existing or absent programs and policies to create equitable pathways for the socioeconomic inclusion of young Arizonans with disabilities.

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# Executive Summary

Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA), with the support of the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC) and in partnership with Arizona Town Hall, has collaborated on a year-long community engagement project designed to bring visibility, spark dialogue, and motivate action to ensure more successful transitions of young people with disabilities — driven by their dreams, desires, and strengths — into postsecondary education and career pathways.

Startling trends reflect the exclusion of young people with disabilities in postsecondary education and the workplace in Arizona. Mirroring national trends, in Arizona, young people with disabilities are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll and obtain a degree in postsecondary education, and enter the world of work when compared to their peers without disabilities. Specific examples include:

- In 2020, only 68 percent of students with disabilities graduated in 4 years, compared to 78 percent among all students statewide.
- In 2021, only 28 percent of 25-64-year-olds with disabilities had an Associate's Degree or higher, compared with 44 percent of 25-64-year-olds without disabilities.
- Only 36 percent of working-age individuals (ages 16-64) with a disability were employed, compared to a 72 percent employment rate for working-age individuals without a disability (ADDPC, 2019).

The critical gaps and untapped potential among young people with disabilities in our state have a significant impact on the lives of young Arizonans and their families, as well as our state's collective success. Over the last year, CFA and Arizona Town Hall have worked together to host a series of Community Conversations designed to:

- Bring trusted data to inform and prompt dialogue around these issues.
- Engage cross-sector leaders to understand the challenges and opportunities for action.
- Amplify the voices of young people with disabilities and their families in generating solutions with a focus on starting the conversation at earlier ages.
- Identify where action can be taken through additional data, engagement, or resources.

This report summarizes the key research, perspectives from community conversations, and takeaways from the process. The process surfaced challenges and opportunities for action such as:

- **Investment and support in K-12 Education:** Structural education opportunity gaps disproportionately affect youth with disabilities. More investment and support in special education with a focus on early career exploration and transition planning is needed.
- **Early childhood and family support:** Families report challenges in navigating complex systems and messages about their child's health, educational journey, and future pathways. They need to be connected early with critical resources and a sense of possibility for the future.
- **Career & Technical Education (CTE) and counseling:** More communication and access to apprenticeship and CTE programs are needed for students with disabilities, families, and educators with support from in-school counselors.

- **Evidence-driven and collaborative strategies:** More data is needed on programs that serve students with disabilities, as well as greater coordination, accountability, and communication across sectors, including education and nonprofit, as well as employers, government agencies, and service providers.
- **Career recruitment and workplace:** Youth with disabilities experience greater challenges during the career recruitment process, discriminatory hiring practices, and barriers to the workplace. Employers need to be reached with key information about the untapped potential that young people with disabilities bring to the workforce.

Ultimately, we all need to work together to activate community-led solutions to ensure young people with disabilities have equitable access to opportunity in postsecondary and career pathways.

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# Structural Education Inequities

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Students with a disability experience more challenges to equitable access to education and postsecondary experiences than their peers without a disability. These inequities appear in various forms and derive from different reasons and contexts like population changes and staffing, discriminatory policies, and funding.

**Population Changes and Staffing:** Over the past decade, Arizona’s public education enrollment has increased by 5 percent (Arizona Department of Education, 2022). The number of students identified as having a disability, however, has increased threefold by 15 percent, with the largest identified disability groups being students with a developmental delay, a mild intellectual disability, autism, or another health impairment (Arizona Department of Education, 2022). This growth has paralleled an increase in unfilled special education positions, which has grown to about 9 percent across the state of Arizona. These unfilled positions also encompass special education-related service providers such as occupational therapists (9 percent), physical therapists (3 percent), speech pathologists or therapists (11 percent), and psychologists (6 percent). Moreover, Arizona continues to rank last in the nation for its counselor-to-student ratio, which hovers around a 1:700 ratio despite the recommendation of a 1:250 ratio (American School Counselor Association, 2021). These figures paint a disproportionate picture of staffing support for students with disabilities and can affect their transition to postsecondary engagement opportunities.

**Discriminatory Policies:** Likewise, some school and district policies disproportionately affect students with disabilities. Most notable are zero-tolerance discipline policies that outline predetermined consequences, which are often severe and punitive in nature and intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context. Research has shown these policies to disproportionately affect students with disabilities, among other subgroups. The Arizona Department of Education (2022) tracks yearly suspension rates among students with disabilities and has found that students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by suspension-related discipline policies. During the 2020-2021 legislative session, Arizona did pass HB2123, which limits suspensions and expulsions among all students in grades K-4, but more systemic changes to school discipline policies and procedures still need to be addressed, specifically for students with disabilities.

**Funding:** Arizona has consistently been rated as one of the states with the lowest amount of funding dedicated to education, and the lack of equitable funding disproportionately affects students with disabilities. Students with disabilities require more funding than the average per-pupil amount. Without a deeper investment by the federal government, that burden (often upwards of 80 percent) often falls onto the local and state governments to compensate for the difference (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2017). This lack of access to sustainable and equitable funding can also be tied back to the inability to attract certified, highly qualified special education teachers, and special education-related service providers.

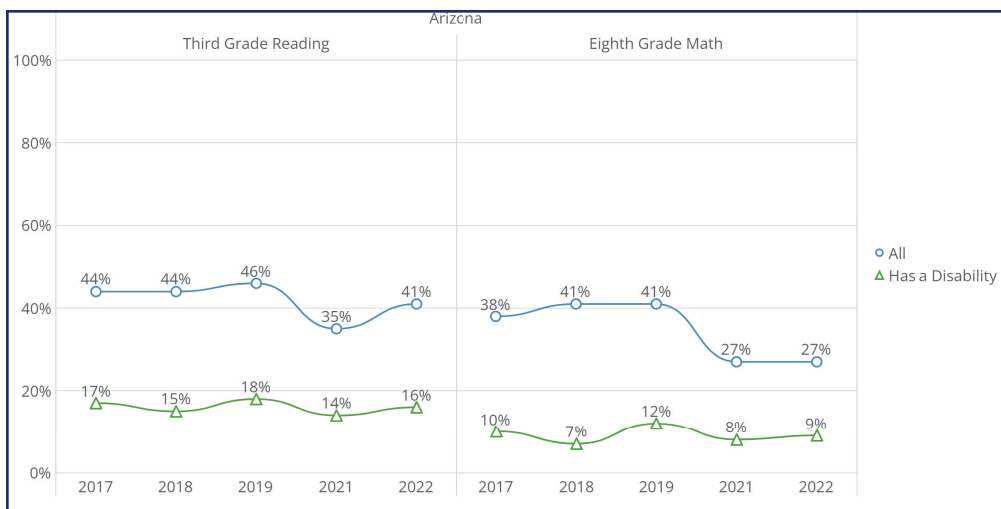
A current report from the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Council (2020) echoes many of these same findings that have specifically hindered access to college for students with disabilities. Additionally, the report cites a host of other challenges in line with attendance and retention while in college (such as a lack of funding and scholarships, lowered expectations of students, and a narrow pipeline of college preparatory opportunities) that prevent a supportive transition and postsecondary engagement experience.

# Education Progress Meters

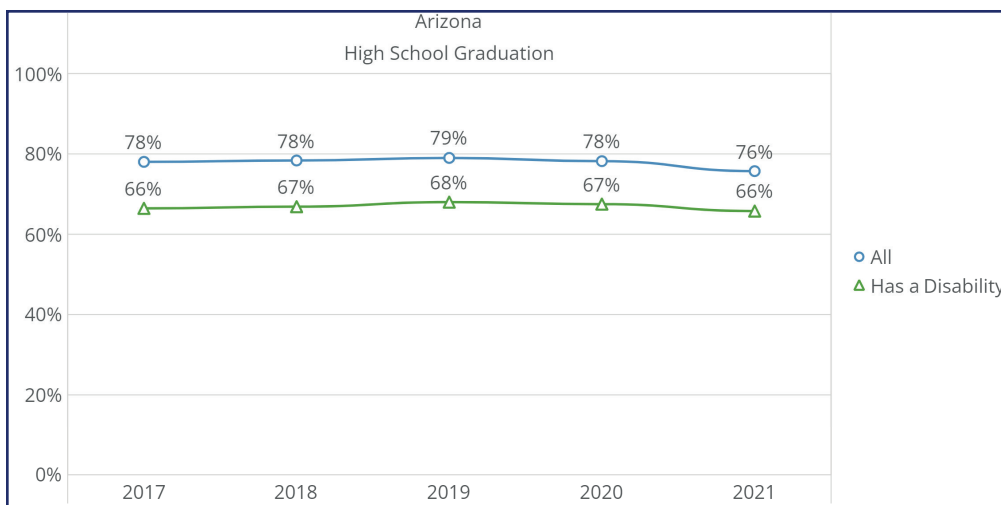
**A Look at the Arizona Progress Meters Data:** Inspired by the simple truth that what gets measured gets done, the Center for the Future of Arizona created the Arizona Progress Meters. These dynamic tools are a source of trusted information designed to help measure and report on how our state is doing on the things that matter most to Arizonans. The set of eight Arizona Progress Meters includes over 80 metrics that help communities and leaders make decisions based on trusted and regularly updated data. The Arizona Progress Meters make it possible to assess how Arizona is doing on a state, county, and local basis to compare outcomes by geography and key demographics where available, including race and ethnicity, educational attainment, disability status, and income.

Developed in partnership with Education Forward Arizona, with data from the Arizona Department of Education and the Arizona Board of Regents, the Arizona Education Progress Meter tracks outcomes for students with a disability. Below are a few measures that include data for Arizonans with a disability:

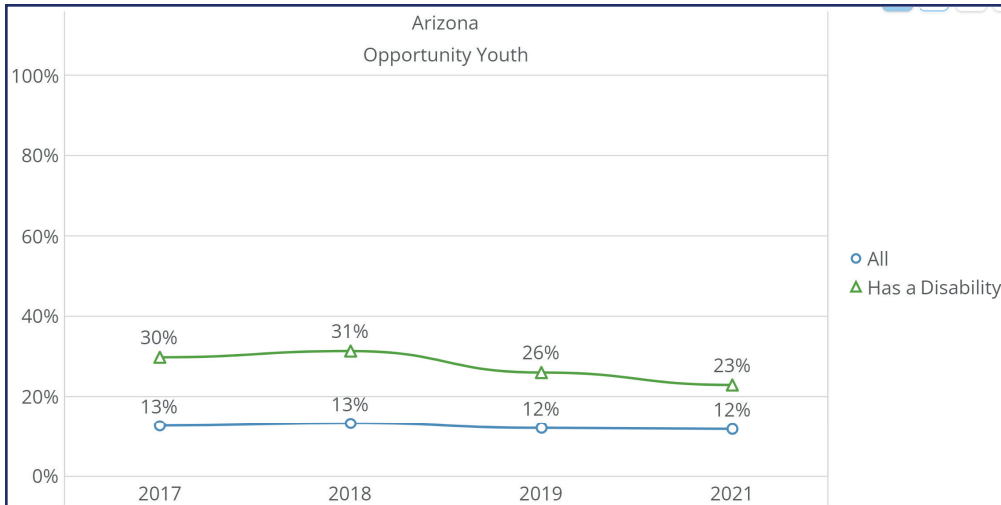
**Third Grade Reading and Eighth Grade Math:** Percentage of students who score proficient or highly proficient on their state annual benchmark tests.



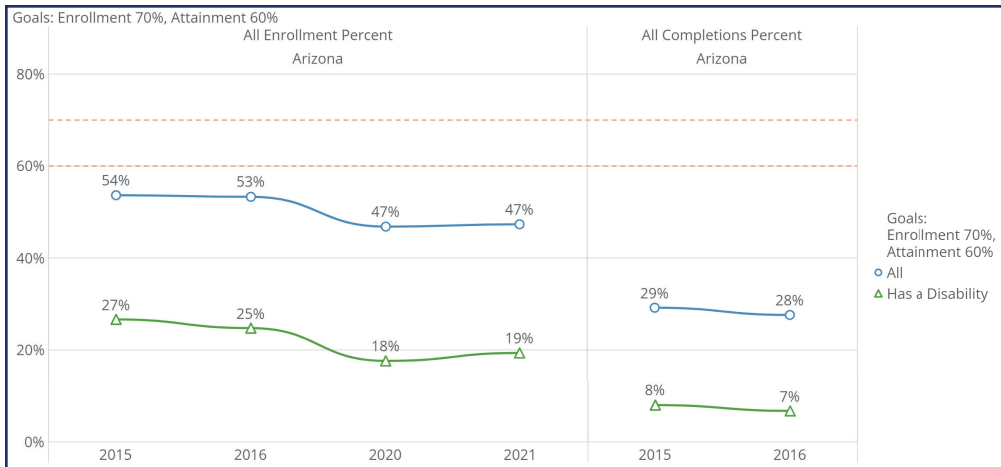
**High School Graduation:** Percentage of students who graduate from high school in 4 years.



**Opportunity Youth:** The percentage of Arizonans age 16 to 24 who are not going to school or working.



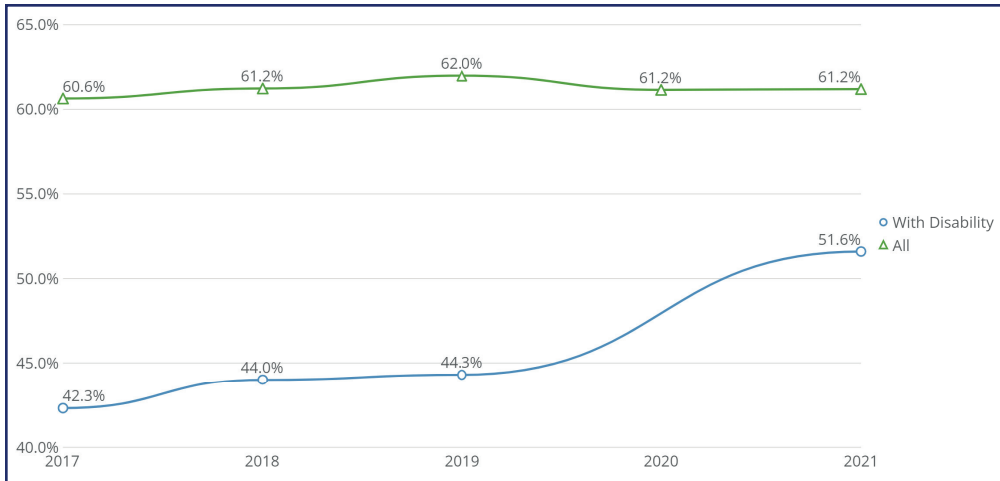
**College-going and Postsecondary Completion:** Percentage of Arizonans enrolling in a postsecondary institution within one year of graduation from high school and the percentage completing a postsecondary degree or certificate within six years.



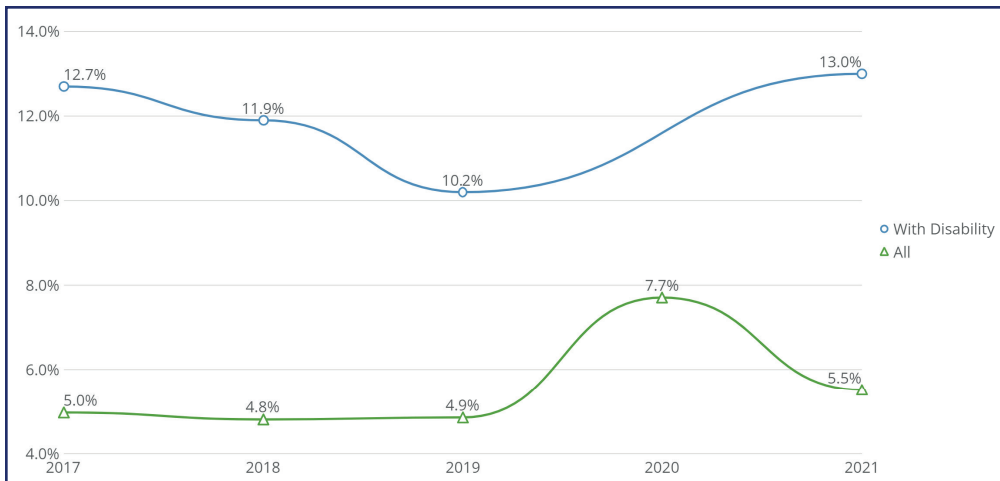
# Jobs

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Arizona Jobs Progress Meter tracks Labor Force Participation and Unemployment rates for people with a disability.

**Labor Force Participation:** The percentage of people ages 24-65 in Arizona who are actively working or looking for work.



**Unemployment Rate:** The percentage of Arizonans of working age who are not working but are available to take a job and are actively looking for work.





## Career and Technical Education (CTE)

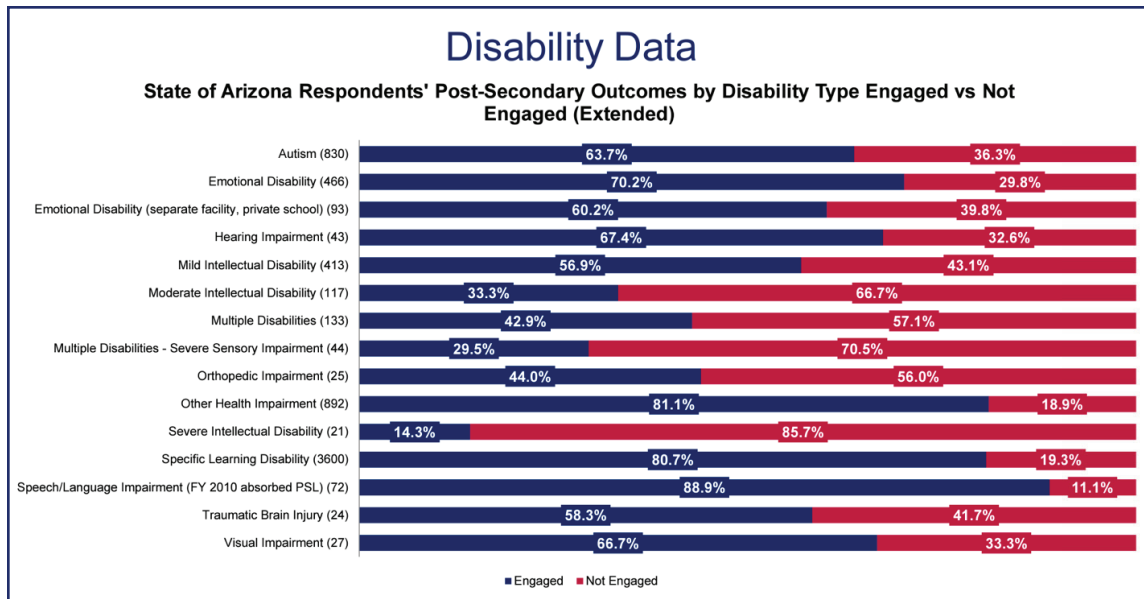
Each year, approximately 11.8 million students across the U.S. participate in Career and Technical Education (CTE) experiences, and just under 1 million of those students have a disability. While some states have witnessed a rise in CTE enrollment among students with disabilities, Arizona's CTE enrollment growth among special needs populations has been much slower. According to the Arizona Department of Education, an opportunity gap exists for students with a disability to access CTE programs at their school or within their school district (Using Data to Identify and Address CTE Opportunity Gaps, 2022). This is particularly concerning given that data has shown enrollment in CTE courses can benefit students with a disability by increasing graduation rates, academic proficiency, and developed skills (NSBA, 2019).

- **School Graduation Rates:** Students with a disability who participate in CTE programs graduate at a higher rate than their peers with a disability who do not participate in CTE programs. In some states, students with a disability who participate in CTE programs graduate at the same rate as their CTE-enrolled peers without a disability. In Arizona's most recent data (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), 90 percent of students with a disability enrolled in CTE programs graduate high school within four years. Over 55 percent of these students continue their education in postsecondary institutions, enroll in continued training, or enter the workforce directly.
- **Academic Proficiency:** Students with a disability who participate in CTE programs have shown higher levels of academic proficiency than their peers with a disability not enrolled in CTE programs. Some states have seen an increase in reading proficiency, math proficiency, or both. Over time (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), students with a disability enrolled in CTE programs in Arizona have shown higher reading proficiency scores than students with a disability not enrolled in CTE programs. Overall, 9 percent of Arizona's CTE-enrolled students with a disability meet or exceed the state reading assessment proficiency levels, 11 percent meet or exceed the state math assessment proficiency levels, and 12 percent meet or exceed the state science assessment proficiency levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).
- **Developed Skills:** Students with a disability who participate in CTE programs have the opportunity to develop a range of skills, including independent living skills, interpersonal skills, time management skills, and workplace skills. Additionally, many CTE programs offer a technical skills assessment that aligns with industry-specific standards and can assist students with entering the workforce right after high school. Students with a disability who take the technical skills assessment for the industry of their choice often pass at the same rates as students without a disability in the same program. In Arizona, almost half (48 percent) of the students with a disability who take their CTE technical skills assessment pass (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Additionally, according to the Arizona Department of Education's Exceptional Students Services 2022 data (Figure 1), a number of students with a disability graduate high school "not engaged." Engagement is defined as being enrolled in a higher education institution or postsecondary training, being competitively employed (paid at or above minimum wage and working with others without a disability), or working some other type of employment (i.e., family business).

**Figure 1**

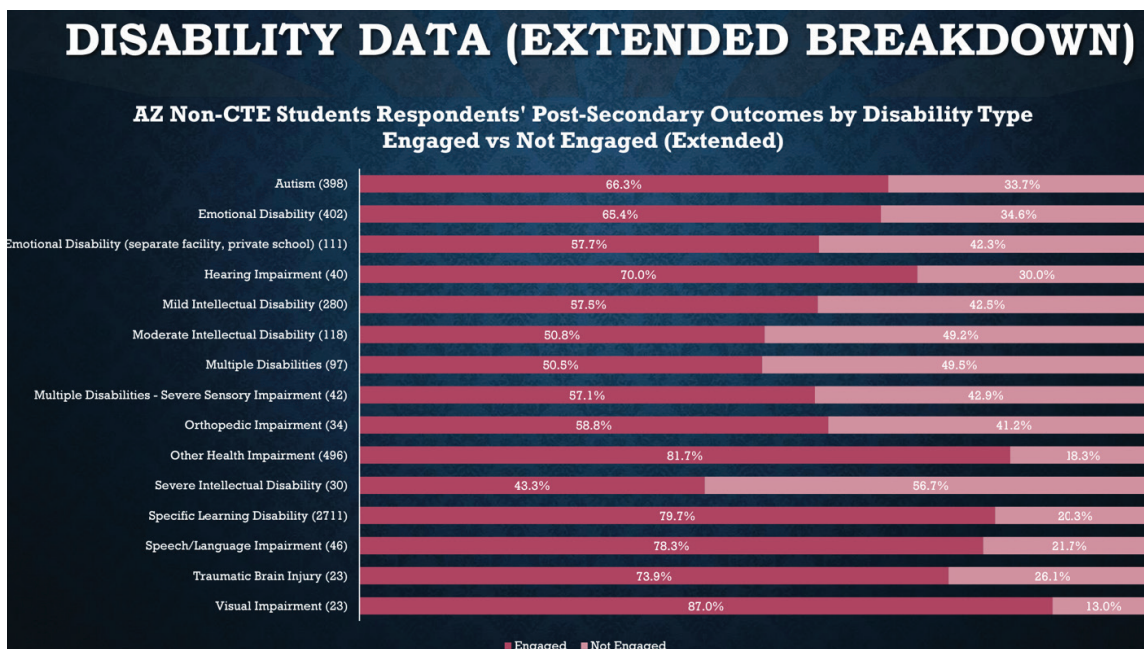
(*Exceptional Student Services, 2022*).



When looking specifically at the postsecondary outcomes of students with a disability enrolled in a CTE program, there are notable differences in outcomes between these students and students with a disability not enrolled in a CTE program. Figures 2 and 3 show that CTE-enrolled students with a disability were markedly more engaged than their peers not enrolled in CTE programs. This was true across the range of disabilities, outside of students with multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, and visual impairments.

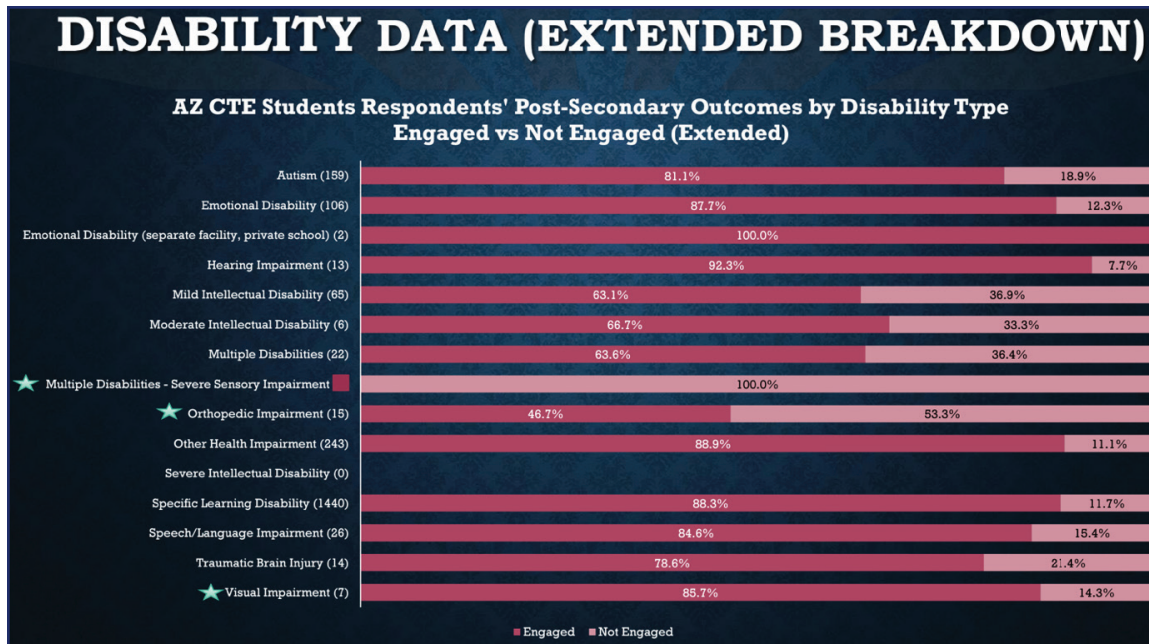
**Figure 2**

(*Johnson et al., 2018*).



**Figure 3**

(Johnson et al., 2018)



Educational opportunities for youth with disabilities in Arizona have certainly shown promising gains in preparing youth with disabilities for socioeconomic inclusion and access to the workforce and, in turn, bolstering our state’s economic development. However, we still have several challenges to overcome. For one, structural barriers exist to students with a disability receiving a fully funded, high-quality education delivered by certified educators and personnel. Second, data from the Arizona Department of Education and Center for the Future of Arizona illuminate challenges youth with disabilities in our state face in access to resources to navigate the transition from K12 to postsecondary education or training. Third, while CTE programs have shown a direct positive impact on the postsecondary outcomes of youth with disabilities, CTE program offerings across Arizona lack equity in investment and access.

# Community Conversations

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Over the last year, CFA and Arizona Town Hall have worked together to host a series of Community Conversations designed to:

- Bring trusted data to inform and prompt dialogue around these issues.
- Engage cross-sector leaders to understand the challenges and opportunities for action.
- Amplify the voices of young people with disabilities and their families in generating solutions with a focus on starting the conversation at earlier ages.
- Identify where action can be taken through additional data, engagement, or resources.

These sessions have included conversations with organizations such as Grupo de Apoyo para Niños Especiales (GANE), a support group for parents of young people with disabilities, the East Valley Equity Consortium, the Institute for Human Development Evidence for Success Conference, and the Pima & Pinal Counties Communities of Practice engaging stakeholders across K-12, support services, government, and workforce.

Using the Arizona Town Hall method, each session led to a summary report that captured and summarized comments from participants in the session. The complete reports are available in the Appendix, and we have categorized by theme the comments and recommendations of these sessions here.

## Comments and Recommendations from Community Conversations Categorized by Theme

### Education (K-12 through Postsecondary)

- It's important to integrate a "discovery" approach at all levels (PreK to post-education). A "discovery" approach is presuming children have abilities and we just need to discover what they are. The discovery approach ensures equity and is integral to ensuring effective employment.
- Teachers and educational institutions play a critical role in early intervention and ongoing support. We need to support teachers and schools in taking the following actions:
  - » Focus on what the individuals want to accomplish. Support students in a manner where we honor their dreams and options.
  - » Provide resources to schools so they will effectively intervene as early as possible.
  - » Create opportunities for special education educators to collaborate with other educators in the system, so the education systems work together better.
  - » Provide options beyond Career and Technical Education (CTE); and educate CTE educators so that they better understand the success rates for children with disabilities.
  - » Provide additional training and tools to teachers both in their education at the university and in continuing education opportunities.
  - » We also should look at options for increasing funding, funding efficiency, and more effective funding allocation.

- » When it comes to school funding and special education funds, the dollars do not always follow the students, which is a problem.
- Many areas, especially rural and outlying areas, just do not have enough funding. We should explore funding from local government entities for local needs, as well as, statewide taxes or incentives. We need to educate legislators on how to maximize federal funding instead of having unspent funds go back to the federal government. We should also explore how to better access foundation and grant funds to supplement needs or to use as seed money wherever possible—perhaps even for teachers or cohorts of teachers to work together.
- School Boards do not always realize the ability they have to reallocate funds and we can inform them about these options.
- National caps that disincentivize progressions should be changed. We should work at a national level to change these caps.
- It's important to address educational opportunities. Often there are not enough services or teachers who are informed about how to best work with kids with disabilities. Some teachers do not take enough time to actually teach children with disabilities or to provide them with individual educational opportunities that would make a difference. Instead, they just pass them through systems or treat the classroom more like babysitting than educating.
- Many teachers simply do not sufficiently understand how to better provide opportunities for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities should be given positive messages about what they can do and should be challenged.
- The most important areas to address are related to our educational institutions and the resources available to people with disabilities in the state of Arizona. We must make sure that we properly equip people with disabilities to graduate from four-year institutions. We as a community should focus on a successful transition beginning with early intervention. Arizona is a childcare desert, where daycare is difficult to obtain oftentimes. Because of this, the disability is being identified much later in life which makes the journey of identifying resources more difficult for the parent.
- Teachers have a lot of pressures and working with students with special needs can lead to burnout. We should make greater efforts to support teachers. We also need to provide teachers with training, so they better understand the transition to higher education, employment, and independence for students with disabilities.
- From a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor's perspective, special education teachers aren't educated about the resources that are available to the students. These teachers are unaware of the government agencies that can assist their students. There should be a mandate, perhaps through the legislature, that all education programs from General Education to Special Education, include a course on community resources.
- We should hire quality staff in our educational institutions and in our state agencies. There are large vacancies which cause a lack of resources in our schools and developmental disability programs. This change might need to come through a community action plan. The legislature may need to solve the staffing issue by increasing pay in programs to serve individuals with disabilities in our state.
- With the Developmental Disabilities waiver, we must go into schools every year before the start of the school year to do training with the new special education staff and educate them on the



DD waiver. We must get the parents involved in this process and it should start when the child is young, preferably in kindergarten if possible. It is important to educate the parents throughout this entire process.

- Phoenix Union High School (PUHS) does a great job at promoting and demonstrating inclusion. People need to see examples of success stories, such as PUHS, and they need to see it in action. People need to understand the supports that people with disabilities use to be successful for it to become embedded in the culture
- Special Education Parent Advisory Committees (SEPACs) should be formed at all school systems, where parents gather and develop demands for the school system. SEPACs should include topics such as training on Individualized Education Plans and serve to help the parents advocate for their child
- In colleges (Northern Arizona University, Arizona State University, and University of Arizona) there should be a curriculum that offers classes to people with disabilities. The Institute for Human Development should be the lead agency to bring about that change within universities. The Arizona Board of Regents needs to be brought into this discussion to require universities to embed the curriculum into the higher education system. Additionally, there is a need to hire more faculty and curriculum developers, so that students with disabilities can have a more inclusive experience in college. This is important because students with a disability need to see their peers in college also obtaining a diploma.
- There is some funding that already exists which can be used differently. Funding can be better utilized if it is distributed from a student's perspective, so the family is aware of services available.

## Transitions to Postsecondary and Career

- One gap is facilitation for youth as they transition out of high school. Students and their families become accustomed to the support they received in school and once they leave, they are not as able to navigate opportunities—including those with Vocational Rehabilitation. Once students leave school, there is no one to sit with them and help them sift through possibilities or to make decisions on the most important action steps to take. It would be helpful to have additional resources to help students with this transition.
- Some examples of what can be done to allow young adults with disabilities achieve independence include:
  - » Creating accessible driving manuals that allow them to learn how to drive (including manuals in Spanish).
  - » Creating awareness with employers so that employers better understand how to work with adults with disabilities in creative ways that create benefits for everyone.
  - » Create social stories (or role-playing) for adults with disabilities which allows them to better navigate situations more independently.
- We should start helping transition after Early Intervention from middle to high school, and then from high school to college. We should focus on employability skills so that students with disabilities can transition easily into adulthood. As a community, we must instill an expectation that people with disabilities can and have the ability to work. In our state, there are many more full guardianships than in other states. This means that disabled people are discouraged or

prevented from working because of their guardianship status, or are assumed to be unable to care for themselves when in fact, they are able to make many decisions.

- We need to provide more financial support for families that can be used for Career and Technical Education and training. This can include, for example, barbeque grilling and other courses that teach specific career or technical skills.
- We need to provide students with as many opportunities to gain experience in Career and Technical Education (CTE) through the Central Arizona Valley Institute of Technology (CAVIT), as well as, other hands-on opportunities that are adapted for them. We need to strongly advocate for CAVIT to provide more accommodations for students with disabilities. Accommodations do not have to be complicated, and the Job Accommodation Network is a great resource for assistance with accommodations. For CTE programs, we need to look at a “concentrators”, or a skillset approach, instead of assuming that students need to complete the entire program. This type of approach would allow many students to build their resumes in a flexible way that will help them to become successfully employed.

## Workforce

- Arizona@Work workforce boards can collaborate more and use their funding for all workforce boards. If we can connect them to other programs, such as apprenticeship programs, we will build teacher awareness and a pipeline to provide better support and options to those with disabilities.
- It's important to think about more than just where to get needed funding. We should also explore it from the viewpoint of who should be required to provide the funding. Employers stand to gain the most and should be part of the conversation. People with disabilities are an asset to the community, and we should look at funds to support their success as directly related to economic development. We should bring together economic and other organizations as well as government entities that support those with disabilities to look at how to create better collaborations and improved services.
- Technology is a barrier for students. While they have grown up with technology, they do not always understand how to use technology as a tool for the workforce. For example, they may not know how to use voicemail and email, or to follow up with employers. Another barrier for students is transportation. There is no reliable or long-term solution to transportation because we don't have reliable public transportation and we no longer have driver's education in schools.
- Overall, there is a lack of creative or customized support to meet the needs of those with disabilities. One paradigm or approach doesn't work for all. We need more professionals and resources to support people with diverse needs, which includes creative support for realistic job opportunities.
- We need to educate people about the benefits of hiring people with special needs. We might consider making presentations to organizations like Rotary Clubs and other organizations that will allow us to open more doors to job opportunities.
- Perhaps we can form a partnership or coalition with Vocational Rehab, elected officials, and others to explore these kinds of presentations and educational opportunities. The presentations

should include addressing concerns around safety, security, and liability that are not appropriately warranted. They should also include how to have true inclusivity.

- We need to make more efforts to bring awareness to employers about the opportunities adults with disabilities can bring as employees. Cities should partner with stakeholders (students, families, and business) to create collaborative efforts so that families and schools work more effectively with businesses to provide employment. These efforts should begin early, well before graduation. For example, businesses could send representatives to visit classrooms and speak about opportunities for work.
- For successful employment, it is also important to educate employers about the resources available to them to accommodate individuals with disabilities.
- To obtain and maintain employment, transportation, especially in a rural county, is a huge area that needs to be addressed. If someone does not drive or does not have someone who can drive them to work, it is far less likely they will become employed.

## Parents and Family

- We need to educate parents about the resources and opportunities that exist to help their children—including Vocational Rehab and other resources that may be out there. Parents need to understand that when their children leave high school, they will no longer have the same active support for their children. They will need to work with their children to actively seek services.
- It's important to intervene and support families as early as possible. The earlier we start with supporting families, the more choices they will have, and the greater the opportunity for success for all. Starting as early as possible with diagnosis and support includes allowing families and their children to have easy access to resources and information. This may begin as early as birth and, for some, at the hospital.
- We need to create opportunities to better educate physicians, teachers, and providers about the importance of letting parents know signs of a potential disability as soon as possible. We also need to encourage early support relating to services and other broader support—such as support to family members who may feel overwhelmed. Support for families not only includes letting them know about resources available to them. It also includes connecting them to emotional support and other resources within their local community.
- Early diagnosis is critical. We can better achieve early diagnosis by educating pediatricians and other professionals. We should encourage and support educational opportunities for pediatricians which would not require much funding.
- Additionally, we have the barrier of identifying the disability of the child in the beginning and once they are identified, they aren't getting the resources that they need. In the classroom, students are already falling behind because they aren't equipped with the proper resources to begin with. They don't get assistive technology equipment, which creates a system where the child is falling further behind. This creates a problem where the child is not ready for college when they reach that milestone and fall through the cracks.
- Parents often know what can help their children in school. Yet, when parents advocate for their



children, school administrators and teachers often become defensive or resent parents' efforts which makes it unnecessarily discouraging and difficult for parents and their children.

- The transition period when children age out is also a major challenge for the youth and their families. Often, they are not well prepared to make this transition because they do not have effective programs at their school and the schools are not always receptive to the programs or interests that will serve them best once they graduate.
- It can be difficult to find places for them to continue to learn and grow and we need to prepare them better for social interactions. We need to focus on the future of the children. We need to prepare them for jobs and to be independent of their parents
- As parents, it is a challenge to communicate and help support children with disabilities. We need to help our children dream and we need to help our community to work as a village to make that happen
- We need to communicate with parents sooner about the transition period, so they have sufficient time to support their children with their next chapter, whether it is technical training, college, or becoming independent with accountable goals. Parents often do not know their rights or may not learn about their rights until it is too late to impact the services provided to their children. This is especially true with parents coming from Mexico who are dealing with a new and different system. One example of a helpful program is "Pilot Partners in Policymaking."
- Parents need to be supported as advocates for their children, whether in the school setting or after they transition out of school. Parents should advocate to legislators, elected leaders, and others to make needed changes to the system and to existing laws to better support those with disabilities.
- Parents need to understand what their child's disability is, and what their child's rights are, and advocate for their child in the school system. It starts with the parents pushing back, which over time will create legislative changes throughout the state.
- Parents need to teach their children how to advocate for themselves which is the most important skill as a disabled individual. This will empower the child with the disability to navigate the system and help them to transition into adulthood.
- The earlier we can engage students and their families the better the outcomes. This should include addressing fears such as losing social security
- There should be cross-sectional collaborations, such as the provision of grant writers to parent groups and others.
- An effort should be made to "translate" technical language and jargon to make it more accessible and culturally responsive to families.

## Public Awareness, Data, and Collaboration

- There is a lot of confusion around available resources. We should support a statewide community of practice that supports the local communities of practice who have the responsibility of educating and informing parents about resources. A statewide community of practice would

allow local communities of practice to accomplish their missions more efficiently and effectively.

- We need accountability. We need to bring people together to look at metrics for success—redefining accountability using a shared vision for the student, family, the campus, and the community. Success should be defined as the Arizona we want and choices for all
- We need to offer continuing education to pediatricians and others
- We need to take a “grassroots to grass tops” approach. Parents, families, legislators, and organizations all need to be involved with common messaging, goals, and a united movement that creates a mindset shift in the community and works towards a more collaborative and effective access to resources
- We need to collaborate more effectively. It’s not a competition and there are mutual benefits to working together. Cities, state agencies, and nonprofits should seek collaborative opportunities to break down silos.
- State agencies should work with providers to have a more centralized hub for contracts, standardized expectations, and a long-term process for employment services.
- Vocational Rehab and the Division of Developmental Disabilities should collaborate better. Providers should be able to use both agencies to create comprehensive services
- The Day Treatment for Adults program from the Division of Developmental should be standardized across the state and include progression toward employment
- Organizations that can assist with these efforts include the Arizona Community Practice on Transition, Arizona Department of Education Transition team, Arizona Council for Exceptional Children, and family support groups
- Equity is critical for maximizing the potential of all students and to close learning gaps with students who may come from historically disadvantaged groups. While equity is important for race, that is not the only group to whom it should apply. For example, an equitable approach is important to individuals with disabilities because we often don’t know what they can become and limit their potential if we don’t provide equitable support. If we allow ourselves to think only of their disabilities, we don’t allow them to be the best they can possibly be. An equitable approach allows them to reach their full potential
- There is a lot of confusion about the definition of equity. Many confuse it with equality which is very different. We need to have a deeper conversation with parents, legislators, and others about the importance of equity for maximizing student potential—especially for those students who have disabilities or who come from historically disadvantaged groups. One description that helps people to understand equity and which most will agree, “We want every child to get exactly what they need to learn the best.”
- A big challenge is simply getting people to understand what equity is and why it is so essential to public education. We should provide clarity about the definition of equity and why it is so essential for an institution that serves many different types of students. We need to fight through the “noise” around the term of equity and dismantle disinformation
- It’s important to think about where and how the information is being communicated. We need to provide information to people in the places where they are and, in a way, they are able to receive and understand it. This means, for example, that we should use storytelling and social

media as part of our communication efforts.

- There are great programs in our state such as Rehabilitative Services. From a parent’s perspective, they may not always know of these resources, and it would be helpful if the school system assisted parents in identifying these resources. Social media could also be utilized to identify resources for children with disabilities. These great programs such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Division of Development Disabilities are not always coordinating services. Different systems are funded and governed differently. Overall, we need better coordination of services to give our students the best chance of success in the State of Arizona
- There has been an increase in students and adults with disabilities incarcerated, especially for those with cognitive or intellectual disabilities. We need to look at how to address this negative trend—including prevention efforts at an earlier stage that will keep people from going into adult-level incarceration. This population may have adverse childhood experiences that can be better addressed with support such as social and emotional learning which is no longer on the table. They are more vulnerable to being taken advantage of, which may lead to maladaptive coping that creates problems with the legal system. There also may be a lack of understanding by law enforcement and others about intellectual disabilities
- With respect to Native Americans, we need to take the cultural framework into account with communications and services. This includes reframing the “low expectations” message they often receive into one that allows them to believe in their success
- We need to take action to raise expectations and to reduce racism. Less than 10 years ago the Department of Education performed a study that concluded that school districts with success maintained a culture of high expectations for their students. We can all be a part of creating a culture of high expectations and letting students know that we believe in them
- To raise awareness about both challenges and opportunities, we should communicate our recommendations and insights to various organizations and institutions such as the Pinal County School Superintendents at their monthly meeting. We also should take our message to county agencies and state agencies that work with employers including Vocational Rehab, AZ@Work, etc.

## Conclusion

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Based on a review of the research and literature on these topics and the perspectives and takeaways from Community Conversations held from February to September in 2023, the following challenges and opportunities for action have surfaced.

Key recommendations that surfaced frequently in the literature and community conversations include:

- **Investment and support in K-12 education:** Structural education opportunity gaps disproportionately affect youth with disabilities, more investment and support are needed.
  - » Provide additional training and tools to teachers through pre-service and continuing education that allow them to more effectively engage with and champion young people with disabilities.

- » Identify and secure increased funding for special education staff to support young people with disabilities while also examining and improving systems for funding allocation.
- » Ensure educators are aware of the resources and support services available to parents through comprehensive public awareness, communications, and education campaigns.
- » Emphasize a strengths-based discovery approach in K-12, which supports young people to uncover and develop their strengths, talents, and interests.
- » Ensure inclusive curriculum and support systems in postsecondary institutions and generate more awareness and stories of success for young people with disabilities to see themselves in higher education.
- **Early childhood and family support:** Families report challenges in navigating complex systems and messages about their child's educational journey and future pathways. They need to be connected early with crucial resources and a sense of possibility for the future.
  - » Ensure parents are aware of the resources and support services available through greater coordination and communication among entities that provide services to families.
  - » Invest in and expand training and education programs for parents in how to advocate for themselves and their children in ways that are culturally responsive.
  - » Generate storytelling and communications strategies that provide positive messages and success stories for parents, from early diagnosis, that emphasize an asset-based approach to their child's journey.
  - » Address gaps in education and awareness for parents, particularly regarding student transition plans, and proactively begin conversations earlier.
- **Career & Technical Education (CTE) and counseling:** More communication and access to apprenticeship and CTE programs are needed for students with disabilities, families, and educators.
  - » Address inequities in access to critical levers for postsecondary transition and career, such as CTE offerings.
  - » Increase awareness and information about apprenticeship and CTE programs for students with disabilities, families, educators, and school leaders.
  - » Start career exploration and transition planning earlier throughout the K-12 continuum and engage the parents as key champions of their child's success.
  - » Increase investment in special education staff to provide equitable learning experiences and environments and a lower ratio of student-to-school counselors to provide career counseling and postsecondary engagement supports.
- **Evidence-driven and collaborative strategies:** More data is needed on programs that serve students with disabilities as well as greater coordination, accountability, and communication across sectors.
  - » Build capacity to address socioeconomic barriers for youth with disabilities through a multi-sectoral approach including education, policy, business, and nonprofits.
  - » Simultaneously focus on grassroot and grass-top approaches that engage communities locally while ensuring more systems-level action at regional and state levels—organizations like Grupo de Apoyo para Niños Especiales (GANE) and the Community of Practice model in Pinal and Pima Counties are promising models for replication.
  - » Collect data to identify trends and outcomes of students and youth with disabilities involved in programs and practices that promote postsecondary engagement. Data collection would encompass all stakeholders, including education professionals, school

and district administrators, parents, and, of course, the primary stakeholders: the students themselves.

- » Communicate data findings to a broad swath of stakeholders, including state, local, and school policymakers.
- » Drive greater awareness of how issues of systemic racism and economic inequity exacerbate inequitable outcomes for young people with disabilities.
- **Career recruitment and workplace:** Youth with disabilities experience greater challenges during the career recruitment process, discriminatory hiring practices, and barriers to the workplace and employers need to be reached with key information about the untapped potential that young people with disabilities bring to the workforce.
  - » Invest in and expand employer education campaigns that help industries understand the untapped potential of young people with disabilities and how best to create inclusive, supportive environments for success.
  - » Ensure communication methods are accessible for all individuals, including plain language, alt-text, Braille, audio, etc. Additionally, assistive technology, accessible entryway and bathrooms, and reasonable workplace accommodations should be adopted for an inclusive work environment.
  - » Provide training to increase disability etiquette and address bias and discrimination of youth with disabilities in educational settings, youth development programs, and postsecondary engagement opportunities. Such training should be part of any initial onboarding processes as well as embedded within ongoing professional development activities in pursuit of making the workplace inclusive.

These recommendations just begin to identify a path forward. Indeed, they involve a cross-sector effort involving investment, policy change, and grassroots organizing and communication. Ultimately, we all need to work together to activate community-led solutions to ensure young people with disabilities have equitable access to opportunity in postsecondary and career pathways.

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# Appendix A:

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## Literature Review and Preliminary Recommendations

### The Economic Impact and Barriers and Solutions Youth with Disabilities Experience in the Workforce and Workplace

Socioeconomic exclusion of youth with a disability undoubtedly affects the Arizona economy and communities. In a 2019 report by the Institute for Community Inclusion (Winsor et al.), findings cite disparate economic mobility for youth with disabilities. While Arizona does have mid-level rates of employment of individuals with a disability, only two-thirds of individuals with a disability are employed, and approximately one-third of individuals with a disability live in a household with income below the federal poverty line. As the number of youth with a disability entering the workforce increases, the report points to the positive outcomes our state could potentially reap in terms of gross domestic product, job creation, and the amount of taxes paid into Arizona's annual budget.

Of course, there are barriers that must be addressed to increase the number of youth with a disability entering the workforce. Youth with disabilities face a range of barriers to socioeconomic inclusion in their transition to the workforce and existence in the workplace. The following barriers and solutions have been identified and discussed in parallel reports by several agencies, including the Arizona Developmental Disability Council (Leyva, 2021), the Morrison Institute for Public Policy and the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (McFadden et al., 2015), the World Health Organization (2010).

#### Lack of Awareness

**Barrier:** There is a lack of awareness of transition and workforce development opportunities for students and youth with disabilities. Coupled with the disproportionate access to high-quality special education teachers and personnel and school counselors, students with disabilities often do not receive career counseling or information to help them make informed postsecondary choices.

**Solution:** Increase awareness and information about apprenticeship and CTE programs for students with disabilities, families, educators, and school leaders. This would include greater investment and utilization of PAs and RAPs, more investment in special education staff to provide equitable learning experiences and environments, and a lower ratio of student-to-school counselors to provide career counseling and postsecondary engagement supports.

#### Workforce Recruitment and Access

**Barrier:** Youth with disabilities experience greater challenges during the career recruitment process and with access to the workplace. Employers can discourage individuals with disabilities from applying for a position due to disenfranchising recruitment methods and communication inaccessibility. For example, a workplace's website, branding, and messaging or even the application process can be challenging and inaccessible if it is not easy to navigate or does not include features such as plain language or alt-text. Another example is how the physical workspace can affect equitable access and promote a sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities.

**Solution:** Build capacity to address socioeconomic barriers for youth with disabilities through a multi-



sectoral approach (education, policy, business, nonprofits). Ensure communication methods are accessible for all individuals, including plain language, alt-text, Braille, audio, etc. Additionally, assistive technology, accessible entryways and bathrooms, and reasonable workplace accommodations should be adopted for an inclusive work environment.

## Data and Research

**Barrier:** There are gaps in data collection on the effectiveness of programs and practices adopted by schools and districts that serve students with disabilities. While the Arizona Department of Education has more recently curated publicly available data and presentations, not all schools and districts report accurate data, nor has there been a longitudinal record of streamlined data collection made available to the greater public.

**Solution:** Collect data to identify trends and outcomes of students and youth with disabilities involved in programs and practices that promote postsecondary engagement. Data collection would encompass all stakeholders, including education professionals, school and district administrators, parents, and of course, the primary stakeholder: the students themselves. Communicate data findings to a broad swath of stakeholders, including state, local, and school policy makers.

## Bias and Discrimination

**Barrier:** Research has shown that biases and discriminatory hiring practices continue to marginalize young people with disabilities from participating in the workforce (Ameri et al., 2015). An attitudinal awareness of inclusion and training in disability etiquette (EARN, n.d.) and communication is imperative for an inclusive work environment. Many employers do not infuse disability awareness and etiquette training during employee onboarding, in professional trainings, or as principles of inclusive practices within the workplace.

**Solution:** Provide training to increase disability etiquette and address bias and discrimination of youth with disabilities in educational settings, youth development programs, and postsecondary engagement opportunities. Such training should be part of any initial onboarding processes as well as embedded within ongoing professional development activities in pursuit of making the workplace inclusive. These trainings ideally would champion a Diversity-Equity-Inclusion-Accessibility (IEDA) framework stemming from the 2021 Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce (Executive Order 13985, 2021).

## Programs and Policies for Inclusive Socioeconomic Participation of Youth with Disabilities

A number of programs and policies exist to ensure equitable access and participation in the U.S. workforce and socio-economy for individuals with disabilities. In particular, Arizona has adopted some of these programs and policies to serve youth with a disability. However, opportunities exist to streamline the program and policy benefits and collect more robust data on the program and policy outcomes.

### **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**

The WIOA (2015) focuses on bolstering the public workforce by providing training and skills development, especially for youth and individuals who experience barriers to career attainment and employment. WIOA requires educational institutions to provide youth with disabilities opportunities for job exploration, work-based learning experiences, postsecondary counseling, and self-advocacy

training. As of 2020, Arizona has received over \$98 million to provide opportunities for workforce development (NAPE, 2020). The largest age demographic to benefit from this funding has been the 16-18-year-old group.

### **The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)**

The Perkins V Act, or Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (2008, 2018), emphasizes the expansion of CTE programs and postsecondary employment opportunities. While the aim of this Act is to provide support and guidance in the development of employability skills of all students, the renewal of the Perkins V Act in 2018 specifically focused on the broad inclusion of special populations, including students with a disability. Since the Act was first adopted in 2008, the CTE enrollment of students with a disability has increased by over 70 percent (NSBA, 2019). The Arizona Department of Education receives funding under the Perkins V Act annually.

### **Apprenticeship Programs**

Some states have adopted pre-apprenticeship (PA) programs that focus on preparing students with disabilities for participation in a Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP). Together, these programs aim to blend traditional classroom experiences with applied learning and support services to prepare underserved groups for integration within the workforce. To be formally recognized and receive federal funding, a RAP must adhere to the U.S. Department of Labor's five components of quality: an approved training curriculum, hands-on training opportunities, support services for transition and acquired skillsets, related instruction, and employer commitment (2020). In 2017, the U.S. federal government released an executive order calling for the expansion and increased funding for RAPs across the nation. While Arizona has a RAP that is overseen by the state's Department of Economic Security, Arizona lacks an explicit policy on inclusive recruitment and participation of priority youth populations, i.e., youth with a disability, and the majority of Arizona high schools have not adopted a PA program to assist with the transition to a RAP.

# Appendix B:

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## Community Conversation Summary Reports

### 1. Communities at the Center: GANE Listening Session Report

On February 27, 2023, the Center For the Future of Arizona and AZTH held a listening session for Grupo de Apoyo para Niños Especiales (GANE). Approximately 20 participants engaged in interactive discussion using the Arizona Town Hall model of consensus and developed the following priorities and recommended actions.

*What are the most important areas to address and why?*

It's important to address educational opportunities. Often there are not enough services or teachers who are informed about how to best work with kids with disabilities. Some teachers do not take enough time to actually teach children with disabilities or to provide them with the individual educational opportunities that would make a difference. Instead, they just pass them through or treat the classroom more like babysitting than educating.

Many teachers simply do not sufficiently understand how to better provide opportunities for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities should be given positive message about what they can do and should be challenged.

Parents often know what can help their children in schools. Yet, when parents advocate for their children, school administrators and teachers often become defensive or resent parents' efforts which makes it unnecessarily discouraging and difficult for parents and their children.

The transition period when children age out is also a major challenge for the youth and their families. Often, they are not well prepared to make this transition because they do not have effective programs at their school and the schools are not always receptive to the programs or interests that will serve them best once they graduate.

It can be difficult to find places for them to continue to learn and grow and we need to prepare them better for social interactions. We need to focus on the future of the children. We need to prepare them for jobs and to be independent of their parents.

Some examples of what can be done to allow young adults with disabilities to be independent include:

- Creating accessible driving manuals that allow them to learn how to drive (including manuals in Spanish).
- Creating an awareness with employers so that employers better understand how to work with adults with disabilities in creative ways that create benefits for everyone.
- Create social stories (or role playing) for adults with disabilities which allows them to better navigate situations more independently.

As parents, it is a challenge to communicate and help support children with disabilities. We need

to help our children dream and we need to help our community to work as a village to make that happen.

*What actions can we take to have the most impact? Who should take these actions?*

- We need to take more efforts to bring awareness to employers about the opportunities adults with disabilities can bring as employees. The cities should partner with stakeholders (students, families, and business) to create collaborative efforts so that families and schools work more effectively with business to provide employment. These efforts should begin early, well before graduation. For example, businesses could visit classrooms and speak about opportunities for work.
- Teachers have a lot of pressures and working with students with special needs can create burnout. We should make greater efforts to support teachers. We also need to provide teachers with training, so they better understand the transition to higher education, employment, and independence.
- We need to provide more help with transportation services. Social organizations and other organizations who work with the community should transport those who are not mobile places.
- We need to provide more financial support for families that can be used for career and technical education and training. This can include, for example, barbeque grilling and other courses that teach specific skills.
- We need to communicate with parents sooner about the transition period, so they have sufficient time to support their children with their next chapter, whether it is technical training, college or becoming independent with accountable goals. Parents often do not know their rights or may not learn about their rights until it is too late to impact the services provided to their children. This is especially true with parents coming from Mexico who are dealing with a new and different system. One example of a helpful program is “Pilot Partners in Policymaking.”
- Parents need to be supported as advocates for their children, whether in the school setting or after they transition out of school. Parents should advocate to legislators, elected leaders, and others to make needed changes to the system and to existing laws to better support those with disabilities.

## **2. Communities at the Center: Equity Consortium**

On March 31, 2023, the Center For the Future of Arizona and AZTH held a listening session as part of the East Valley Equity Consortium virtual meeting. Approximately 20 participants engaged in interactive discussion using the Arizona Town Hall model of consensus and developed the following priorities and recommended actions, centered around themes of Equity.

- Equity is critical for maximizing the potential of all students and to close learning gaps with students who may come from historically disadvantaged groups. While equity is important for race, that is not the only group to whom it should apply.
- For example, an equitable approach is important to individuals with disabilities because we often don't know what they can become and limit their potential if we don't provide equitable support. If we allow ourselves to think only of their disabilities we don't allow them to be the best they can possibly be. An equitable approach allows them to reach their full potential.

- There is a lot of confusion about the definition of equity. Many confuse it with equality which is very different. We need to have a deeper conversation with parents, legislators and others about the importance of equity for maximizing student potential—especially for those students who have disabilities or who come from historically disadvantaged groups. One description that helps people to understand equity and which most will agree to is this: “We want every child to get exactly what they need to learn the best.”
- A big challenge is simply getting people to understand what equity is and why it is so essential to public education. We should provide clarity about the definition of equity and why it is so essential for an institution that serves many different types of students. We need to fight through the “noise” around the term of equity and dismantle disinformation.
- It’s important to think about where and how the information is being communicated. We need to provide information to people in the places where they are and in a way they are able to receive and understand it. This means, for example, that we should use story telling and social media as part of our communication efforts.

### 3. Communities at the Center: IHD Evidence for Success Conference

On June 21, 2023, the Center For the Future of Arizona and AZTH held a breakout session as part of the Institute for Human Development Evidence for Success Conference. Approximately 30 participants engaged in interactive discussion using the Arizona Town Hall model of consensus and developed the following priorities and recommended actions.

*What are the most important areas to address and why?*

The most important areas to address are related to our educational institutions and the resources available to people with disabilities in the state of Arizona. We must make sure that we properly equip people with disabilities to graduate from four-year institutions. We as a community should focus on a successful transition beginning with early intervention. Arizona is a childcare desert, where daycare is difficult to obtain oftentimes. Because of this, the disability is being identified much later in life which makes the journey of identifying resources more difficult for the parent.

Additionally, we have the barrier of identifying the disability of the child in the beginning and once they are identified, they aren’t getting the resources that they need. In the classroom, students are already falling behind because they aren’t equipped with the proper resources to begin with. They don’t get the assistive technology equipment, which creates a system where the child is falling further behind. This creates a problem where the child is not ready for college when they reach that milestone and fall through the cracks.

We should start helping transition after early intervention from middle to high school, and then from high school to college. We should be focusing on employability skills so that students with disabilities can transition easily into adulthood. As a community, we must be instilling an expectation that people with disabilities can and have the ability to work. In our state, there are full guardianships instead of partial guardianships, which will require a change in the culture in Arizona.

Lastly, there are great programs in our state such as rehabilitative services. From a parent’s perspective, they may not always know of these resources, and it would be helpful if the school system assisted parents in identifying these resources. Social media could also be utilized to identify resources for children with disabilities. These great programs such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Division of

Development Disabilities (DDD) are not always coordinating services different systems are funded and governed differently. Overall, we need better coordination of services to give our students the best chance of success in the state of Arizona.

*What actions can we take to have the most impact? Who should take those actions?*

From a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor's perspective, special education teachers aren't educated about the resources that are available to the students. These teachers are unaware of the government agencies that can assist their students. There should be a mandate, perhaps through the legislature, that all education programs from General Education to special education, should include a course on community resources.

We should hire quality staff in our educational institutions and in our state agencies. There are large vacancies which cause a lack of resources in our schools and developmental disability programs. This may need to change through a community action plan. The legislature may need to solve the staffing issue by increasing the pay in programs to serve individuals with disabilities in our state.

Parents need to understand what their child's disability is, what their child's rights are, and advocate for their child in the school system. It starts with the parents pushing back, which overtime will create legislative changes throughout the state.

With the Developmental Disabilities (DD) waiver, we must go into the schools every year before the school starts and do training with the new special education staff and educate them on this waiver. We must have the parents involved in this process and it should start when the child is young, preferably in kindergarten if possible. It is important to educate the parents throughout this entire process.

In colleges (Northern Arizona University, Arizona State University, University of Arizona) there should be a curriculum which offers classes to people with disabilities. The Institute for Human Development (IHD) should be the lead agency to bring about that change with the universities. The Arizona Board of Regents needs to be brought into this discussion to require universities to embed the curriculum into the higher education system. Additionally, there is a need to hire more faculty and curriculum developers so that students with disabilities can have a more inclusive experience in college. This is important because students with a disability need to see their peers in college also obtaining a diploma.

Phoenix Union High School does a great job at promoting and living out inclusion. People need to see examples of success stories, such as this high school and they need to see it in action. People need to understand the supports that people with disabilities use to be successful which will become embedded in the culture.

The Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) should be formed at all school systems, where parents gather and develop demands to the school system. The SEPAC committee should involve topics such as training on Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and this committee will help the parent to advocate for their child.

Parents need to teach their children how to advocate for themselves which is the most important skill as a disabled individual. This will empower the child with the disability to navigate the system and help them to transition into adulthood.

## 4. Communities at the Center: Pima County Community of Practice

On August 14, 2023, the Center For the Future of Arizona and AZTH held a session as part of the Pima County Community of Practice virtual meetings. Approximately 10 participants engaged in interactive discussion using the Arizona Town Hall model of consensus and developed the following priorities and recommended actions.

*What are the most important areas to address and why?*

When it comes to transitioning youth from high school, there are many challenges.

One gap is facilitation for youth who have transitioned out of high school. The students and their families become accustomed to the support they have in school and once they leave are not as able to navigate the opportunities—including those with VR (Vocational rehabilitation) Once students leave school, there is no one to sit with them and to help them sift through possibilities and to make decisions on the most important action steps to take. It would be helpful to have additional resources to help students with this transition.

We need to educate parents about the resources and opportunities that exist to help their children—including VR and other resources that may be out there. Parents need to understand that when their children leave high school, they will no longer have the same active support for their children. They will need to work with their children to actively seek services.

Technology is a barrier for students. While they have grown up with technology, they do not always understand how to use technology as a tool for the work force. For example, they may not know how to use voice mail and email, to follow up with employers. Another barrier for students is transportation. There is no reliable or long-term solution to transportation because we don't have reliable public transportation and we no longer have driver's education in schools.

Overall, there is a lack of creative or customized support to meet the needs of those with disabilities. One paradigm or approach doesn't work for all. We need more professionals and resources to support people with diverse needs, which includes creative support for realistic job opportunities.

*What actions can we take to have the most impact? Who should take those actions?*

Education to Employers: We need to educate people about the benefits of hiring people with special needs. We might consider making presentations to organizations like Rotary Club and other organizations that will allow us to open more doors to job opportunities.

Perhaps we can form a partnership or coalition with VR, elected officials, and others to explore these kinds of presentation and educational opportunities. The presentations should include addressing concerns around safety, security and liability that are not appropriately warranted. They should also include how to have true inclusivity.

Post-school Support to Students: Provide additional support to students for finding and maintaining a job. (Job retention and development services)

Start Early: The earlier we can engage students and their families the better the outcomes. This should include addressing fears (such as losing social security).



Remove barriers: Whenever possible agencies and organizations should seek to remove barriers to creative solutions.

All of these actions require additional collaboration and support with stakeholders.

## 5. Communities at the Center: Community Conversation Convening

On August 18, 2023, the Center for the Future of Arizona and AZTH held a cross-sector in-person convening attended by 40 participants representing key roles in education, nonprofits, workforce, and higher education. Participants engaged in interactive discussion using the Arizona Town Hall model of consensus and developed the following priorities and recommended actions.

### ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

It's important to intervene and support families as early as possible. The earlier we start with supporting families, the more choices they will have and the greater the opportunity for success for all. Starting as early as possible with diagnosis and support includes allowing families and their children to have easy access to resources and information. This may begin as early as birth and, for some, at the hospital.

We need to create opportunities to better educate physicians, teachers, and providers about the importance of letting parents know signs of a potential disability as soon as possible. We also need to encourage early support relating to services and other broader support—such as support to family members who may feel overwhelmed. Support for families not only includes letting them know about resources available to them. It also includes connecting them to emotional support and other resources within their local community.

It's also important to integrate a “discovery” approach at all levels (PreK to post-education). A “discovery” approach is presuming children have abilities and we just need to discover what they are. The discovery approach ensures equity and is integral to ensuring effective employment.

Teachers and educational institutions play a critical role in early intervention and ongoing support. We need to support teachers and schools in taking the following actions.

1. Focus on what the individuals want to accomplish. Support students in a manner where we honor their dreams and options.
2. Provide resources to schools so they will effectively intervene as early as possible.
3. Create opportunities for special education educators to collaborate with other educators in the systems so the education systems work together better.
4. Provide options beyond CTE; and educate CTE educators so that they better understand the success rates for children with disabilities.
5. Provide additional training and tools to teachers both in their education at the university and in continuing education opportunities.

We need accountability. We need to bring people together to look at metrics for success-- redefining accountability using a shared vision for the student, family, the campus, and the community. Success should be defined as the Arizona we want and choices for all.



## **FUNDING**

Early diagnosis is critical. We can better achieve early diagnosis by educating pediatricians and other professionals. We should encourage and support educational opportunities for pediatricians which would not require much funding. We also should look at options for increasing funding, funding efficiency, and more effective funding allocation.

1. When it comes to school funding and special education funds, the dollars do not always follow the students, which is a problem.
2. Many areas, especially rural and outlying areas, just do not have enough funding. We should explore funding from local government entities for local needs as well as statewide taxes or incentives. We need to educate legislators on how to maximize federal funding instead of having funds go back to the federal government. We should also explore how to better access foundations and grant funds to supplement needs or to use as seed money wherever possible—perhaps even to teachers or cohorts of teachers to work together.
3. School Boards do not always realize the ability they have to reallocate funds and we can inform them about these options.
4. National caps that disincentivize progressions should be changed. We should work at a national level to change these caps.
5. There is some funding that already exists that can be used differently. Funding can be better utilized if it is distributed from a student's perspective, so the family is aware of services available. Arizona at Work workforce boards can collaborate more and use their funding for all workforce boards. If we can connect them to other programs, such as apprenticeships programs, we will build teacher awareness and a pipeline to provide better support and options to those with disabilities.

It's important to think about more than just where to get needed funding. We should also explore it from the viewpoint of who should be required to provide the funding. Employers stand to gain the most and should be part of the conversation. People with disabilities are an asset to the community, and we should look at funds to support their success as directly related to economic development. We should bring together economic and other organizations as well as government entities that support those with disabilities to look at how to create better collaborations and improved services.

There is a lot of confusion around available resources. We should support a statewide community of practice that supports the local communities of practice who have the responsibility of educating and informing parents about resources. A statewide community of practice would allow local communities of practice to accomplish their missions more efficiently and effectively.

## **ADDITIONAL ACTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

1. We need to offer continuing education to pediatricians and others.
2. We need to take a "grassroots to grass tops" approach. Parents, families, legislators, and organizations all need to be involved with common messaging, goals and a united movement that creates a mindset shift in the community and works towards a more collaborative and effective access to resources.
3. We need to collaborate more effectively. It's not a competition and there are mutual benefits to working together. Cities, state agencies and non-profits should seek collaborative opportunities to break down silos.

4. State agencies should work with providers to have a more centralized hub for contracts, standardized expectations, and a long-term process for employment services.
5. VR and DDD should collaborate better. Providers should be able to use both agencies to create comprehensive services.
6. The DTA program should be standardized across the state and include a progression towards employment.
7. There should be cross-sectional collaborations, such as the provision of grant writers to parent groups and others.
8. An effort should be made to “translate” technical language and jargon to make it more accessible and culturally responsive to families.
9. Organizations that can assist with these efforts include the Arizona Community Practice on transition, the ADE Transition Team, the Arizona Council for Exceptional Children, and family support groups.

## **INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENTS TO ACTION**

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with everyone, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the session. Below are individual actions that were shared.

### *I WILL...*

- Continue training parents on special education issues and how they can advocate for themselves.
- Look for ways to continue to engage in these conversations.
- Continue to support initiatives and projects like this by spreading word of opportunities for participation.
- Continue to work with leaders and communities to understand data and strategize on improving outcomes for people with disabilities.
- Continue to advocate for those in my community. I will also connect with Annie at Prescott Community College to discuss ADDPC. Think college!
- Work to increase connections and awareness with economic development/ workforce boards.
- Commit to creating places that will employ people with disabilities.



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