The Graduation Cliff

Improving the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities

Summary Report

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Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council℠

ASU Morrison Institute for Public Policy
Arizona State University

PREPARED FOR

THE ARIZONA DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES PLANNING COUNCIL

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Currently, 13% of Arizona's public education students enrolled in K-12 have disabilities.

As many as one-third of these youth remain unengaged in work or education following graduation, and this trend of economic exclusion continues into adulthood.

It is critical that high schools are prepared to educate and train the growing number of youth with disabilities for life beyond high school. But, more work needs to be done in this area. We are leaving these untapped resources out of Arizona's economic development plan, and placing stress on many individuals with disabilities who hope for more out of life, the families who support them, and our already strapped public benefits system.

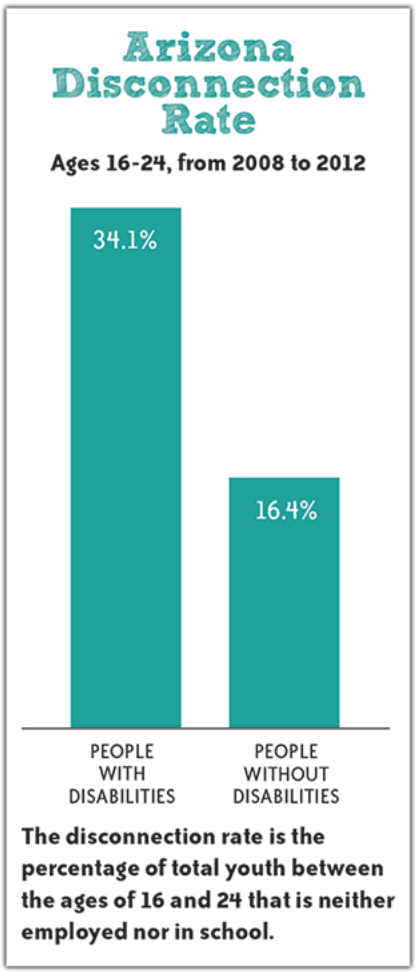
The federal government has recognized that more needs to be done. The recently signed Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) increases individuals with disabilities' access to high-quality workforce services to prepare them for integrated, competitive employment through several initiatives. Under WIOA youth with disabilities are to receive extensive pre-employment transition services before they are deemed "unemployable."

In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 mandates schools to prepare students with disabilities for adult employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation. Yet, it has fallen short of meeting these goals. In response to this void, the U.S. Department of Education has spear-headed and funded many best practice programs. Most recently, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) identified 17 evidence-based predictors of post-school employment, education, and independent living success for students with disabilities.

These predictors include:

- career awareness
- community experiences
- exit exam requirements/ high school diploma status
- inclusion in general education
- interagency collaboration
- occupational courses
- paid employment/work experience
- parental expectations
- parental involvement
- program of study
- self-advocacy/self-determination
- self-care/independent living skills
- social skills
- student support
- transition program
- vocational education
- work study

So, with this federal movement to improve student outcomes and awareness of the predictors needed to obtain positive outcomes, where does Arizona stand? What are we currently doing to move the needle with these predictors in mind, and what do we still need to do?

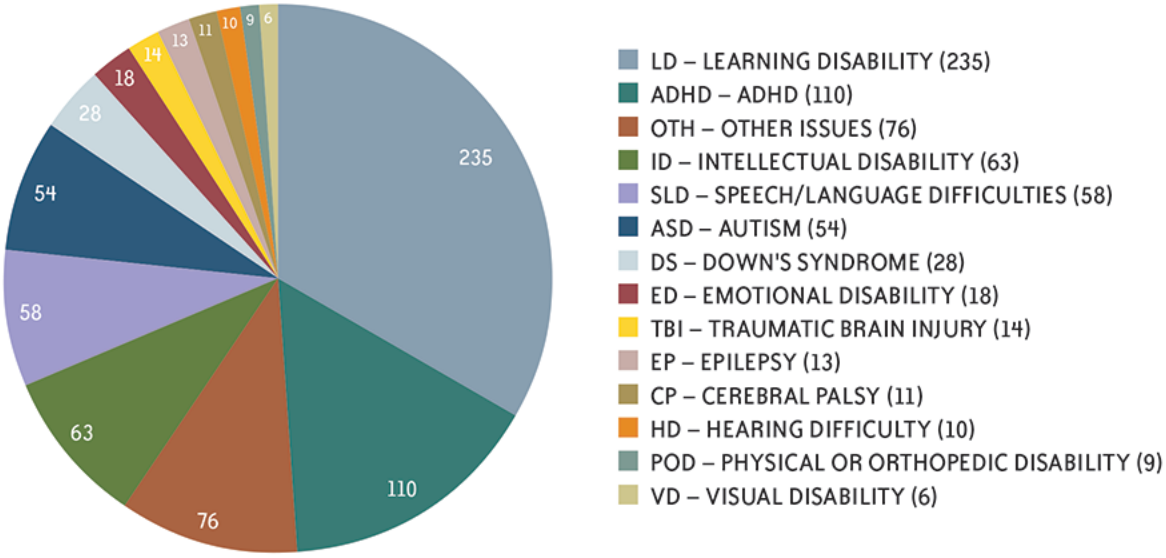


Study Overview

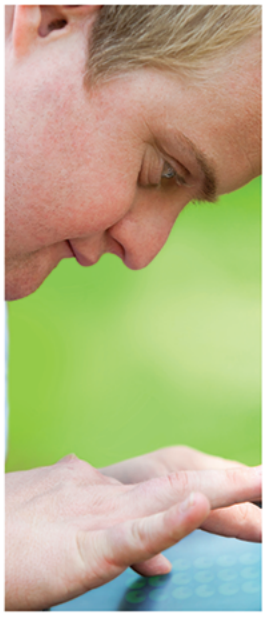
This report prepared for the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council builds upon previous research to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Gain an in-depth understanding of the transition process to post-secondary education and employment for Arizona youth with disabilities enrolled in special education, determining how NSTTAC predictors are utilized and assessing differences due to disproportionality;
2. And understand the hopes and dreams of middle and high school students (and their parents' hopes for their children), and what is being done to support these aspirations.

Study Participants: Youth and Family by Disability



To address these questions, Morrison Institute for Public Policy (MI) surveyed 224 Arizona parents and guardians and 634 high school students with disabilities from 17 districts. MI also conducted 10 focus groups that included family members and middle and high school youth. It further interviewed 30 experts, youth, and families.



As with most public policy issues, the findings showed that there is no single, simple solution to this problem. This brief addresses the issue by highlighting the top three potential causes of these students' lack of progress:

- Low expectations imposed on students with disabilities contribute to students' low levels of confidence and performance. People with disabilities often harbor lofty goals and expectations for themselves, but they are frequently pulled down by others who expect little of them.
- Their lack of skills and/or employers' unwillingness to hire them excludes these students from the working world, further undermining their confidence and, more practically, their opportunity to gain the skills needed to earn a living and reduce dependency on public or private assistance.
- Students with disabilities are often excluded from school activities, clubs and events, isolating them from classmates and the mainstream of school life. Underlining, in other words, that they are "different."

finding 1: STUDENTS ARE OPTIMISTIC, ADULTS MORE CAUTIOUS

Previous research indicates that students' level of hope, self-efficacy, and self-determination predict post-high school academic success, because they link student goals with the motivation, confidence, and ability to achieve them. Help from teachers and school counselors serve as a positive influence and buoy students' hopes for their futures. Most of the students contacted in this study expressed hope about their futures. More than nine in 10, across all grade levels, are thinking about what they would like to do after high school. Further, eight in 10 high school seniors said they feel prepared to either find a job or go to college.

There is a disconnect between adults and youth that may impede the latters' effort to set goals. For example, while 71% of Arizona youth with disabilities report that their families are trying to help them get ready for life after high school, almost half of them feel that adults listen to them only a little, if at all. For those with more significant disabilities, the figure is 70%. In addition, when asked about their likelihood of graduating college, living away from home, and having a job to support themselves financially, the students were positive. But their parents' expectations, when controlling by the significance of the youth's disability, were slightly lower.

An underused resource among students with disabilities is participation in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that target hands-on learning in a specific trade in high school. Youth with mild to moderate disabilities recognize this option – seven in 10 say they will graduate from a trade program. However, as with other aspirations, their families' expectations were 17 percentage points lower for this option.

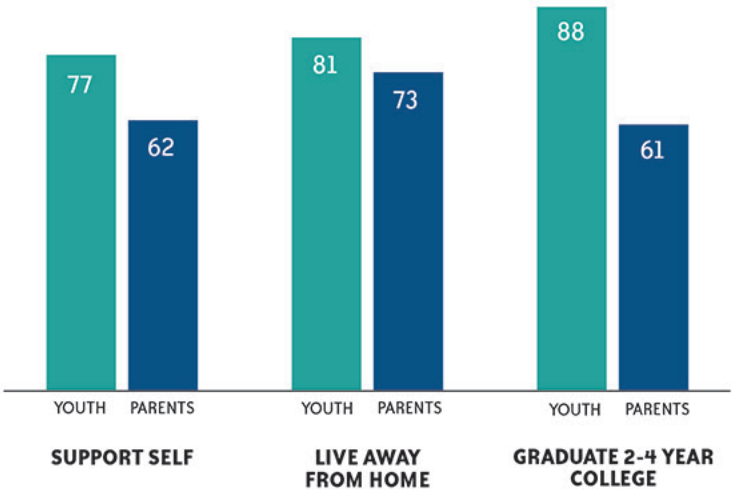
Similarly, when controlling for significance of disability, the intervention of government agencies has a negative effect on student outlook, regardless of disability. Students and parents who receive governmental help report that the student will be less likely to live away from home, get a paid job, or support themselves financially after high school.

"Due to my injuries, many did not expect much of me. I learned to expect more of myself. The hope is that my contributions will raise the expectation that people with disabilities can — and do —enrich and add value to our schools, workforce, and society as a whole."

— Representative Stefanie Mach, Legislative District 10, Arizona State House of Repreentatives

Expectations of Youth and Parents

HOW LIKELY DO YOU THINK IT IS THAT THE STUDENT WILL...?



finding 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A JOB

Although the students are generally optimistic, many harbor concerns about making it on their own after graduation. The top worry, for almost half of these youth, is not having enough money to live on. Additionally, one in three worry about not being able to get a job, or have a concern about living on their own. Job training and preparation are essential to mitigating these fears by giving youth the self-confidence and skills needed to succeed in today's workforce.

Description of Participant Jobs

	SCHOOL-BASED JOBS	COMMUNITY-BASED JOBS
CAFETERIA/RESTAURANT	36	33
JANITORIAL	11	13
COPY CENTER/MAILING	9	0
COMMUNITY STORE CLERK	9	39
TEACHING/TUTORING	7	3
LANDSCAPING	7	41
STUDENT STORE	5	0
CUSTODIAN	5	15
SCHOOL/COMMUNITY EVENT	3	3
FOOD BANK	3	0
RECYCLING	3	0
SECRETARIAL	1	2
COMPUTER/TECH	1	2
ANIMAL CARE	1	12
CONSTRUCTION	1	14
CAR WASH	1	3
PHOTOGRAPHY	1	2
BABYSITTING		73
AUTO REPAIR		11
FAMILY BUSINESS		8
AMUSEMENT PARK		5
HEALTH CARE WORKER		4
DAY CARE		3
COSMETOLOGY		1
DELIVERY		1
FARMING		1
PARKING		1

While many students seek paid employment in the community after graduation, families report that only one in five has a paid community-based job; and those who do hold jobs have less significant disabilities. The effects of having a paid job are overwhelmingly positive. Students with paid work believe that after they finish high school, they will very likely get a job and support themselves financially in the future. Holding a community-based job is also predictive of having greater problem-solving ability and self-efficacy. In turn, those students who have more confidence in their ability to solve their own problems are more likely to have higher aspirations about their futures. Unfortunately, the low number of students who hold jobs helps explain why only 39% of students report being able to solve problems very well.

On the other hand, there is no association between *school-based* jobs and students' aspirations. This can be explained partially by the limited number and range of school positions compared with the variety of work options in the community, and by the population of students served by school-based job programs.

Only 19% of students have a school-based job, and these positions are held primarily by those with significant disabilities. However, other families are resourceful: They report that most of their students (53%) are engaged in volunteer activities to learn needed job skills.

Recognizing the importance of community-based employment, many schools are linking community employers and students through transition programs, or are creating their own school-based businesses, sometimes in partnership with the community. The Transition School to Work (TSW) program, jointly funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration and partnering school districts, is invaluable to high school youth. TSW assists students with significant disabilities in 22 school districts throughout Arizona by providing job training and helping to locate jobs in the community. In addition, the program facilitates referrals to post-secondary employment and education sites to help ensure a seamless transition beyond high school. The federal government supports this program with a $4 federal match for every state dollar spent. However, Arizona does not allocate enough state dollars to obtain the full federal match that would expand this program to all students who could benefit from it.

"Why businesses should hire people with disabilities? You have a tremendous talent that is available to you, 1) that we know is more productive 2) has a higher retention rate and 3) is more engaged in the organization. If you look at those characteristics we know those are characteristics of higher performing organizations that have very significant business results."

— Bob Enderle, Director of Diversity & Community Relations/Organizational Development Strategist

finding 3: EXCLUSION IMPACTS FUTURE PROSPECTS

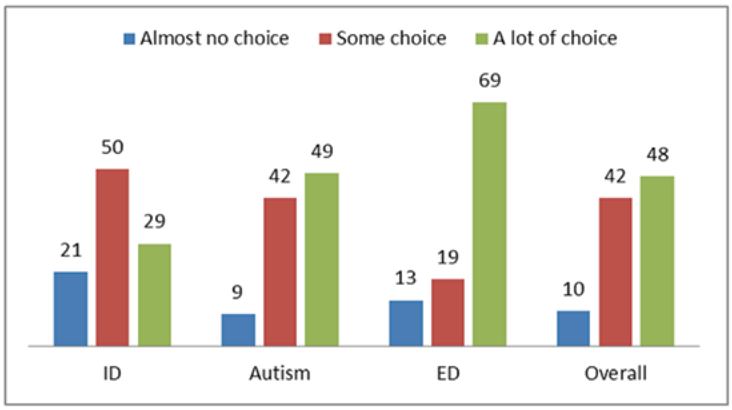
Social skills, emotional intelligence, and personal habits are important for getting and keeping jobs. But students are overwhelmingly unable to hone these skills via access to social and leadership opportunities at school. Many remain socially isolated and disconnected from school activities. Almost half, 47%, of student participants talk to friends outside of school less than once a week; 22% report rarely or never talking to friends outside of school. Further, only a little more than half are involved in school-related extracurricular activities. Asked how often they decide for themselves which school activities to join, four in ten reports "sometimes" or "never."

Bullying is a serious problem among students with disabilities. In the research, 18% reported being bullied or picked on by other students at least once a week. Parents gave a higher number – 38%. Bullying has a significant negative predictive effect on students' future aspirations and self-efficacy. Those who have been bullied feel that they are less likely to graduate high school or support themselves financially after graduation. Further, being attacked or being involved in fights at school were predictive of being suspended. This is a significant problem among students with disabilities, with 25% of students in the family sample having been suspended. This negatively impacts their expectations to graduate high school or college.

On the other hand, this population is heavily digitally connected. Almost four in five are connected to social media and use the computer to do homework assignments with little usage variation affected by significance of disabilities. These findings point to possible technology-based solutions that could supplement social connections and learning opportunities that are currently limited for these students in today's school environments.

finding 4: STUDENTS EXPERIENCE LIMITED DECISION-MAKING

Overall, this study finds that students' voices are lacking in school decision-making and are contributing to the deficit in strengthening the independent living skills of high school graduates with disabilities. Some schools are trying to remedy this by implementing self-advocacy/self-determination training, which focuses on enhancing personal capacity by creating awareness of their rights, developing meaningful opportunities for them to participate, and modifying the environment so barriers for participation are removed. In the absence of this training, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is the universal, school-based mechanism that can grow these skills.



Choice over IEP Goals by % of Disability Group in Study Sample

Support given by the IEP can maximize the learning potential of every student when utilized correctly. With supports written into the IEP that mitigate learning barriers, students are able to better identify their own strengths and build their confidence. Further, students' involvement in their own IEP helps them identify their own abilities and weaknesses, which are essential in building self-advocacy skills.

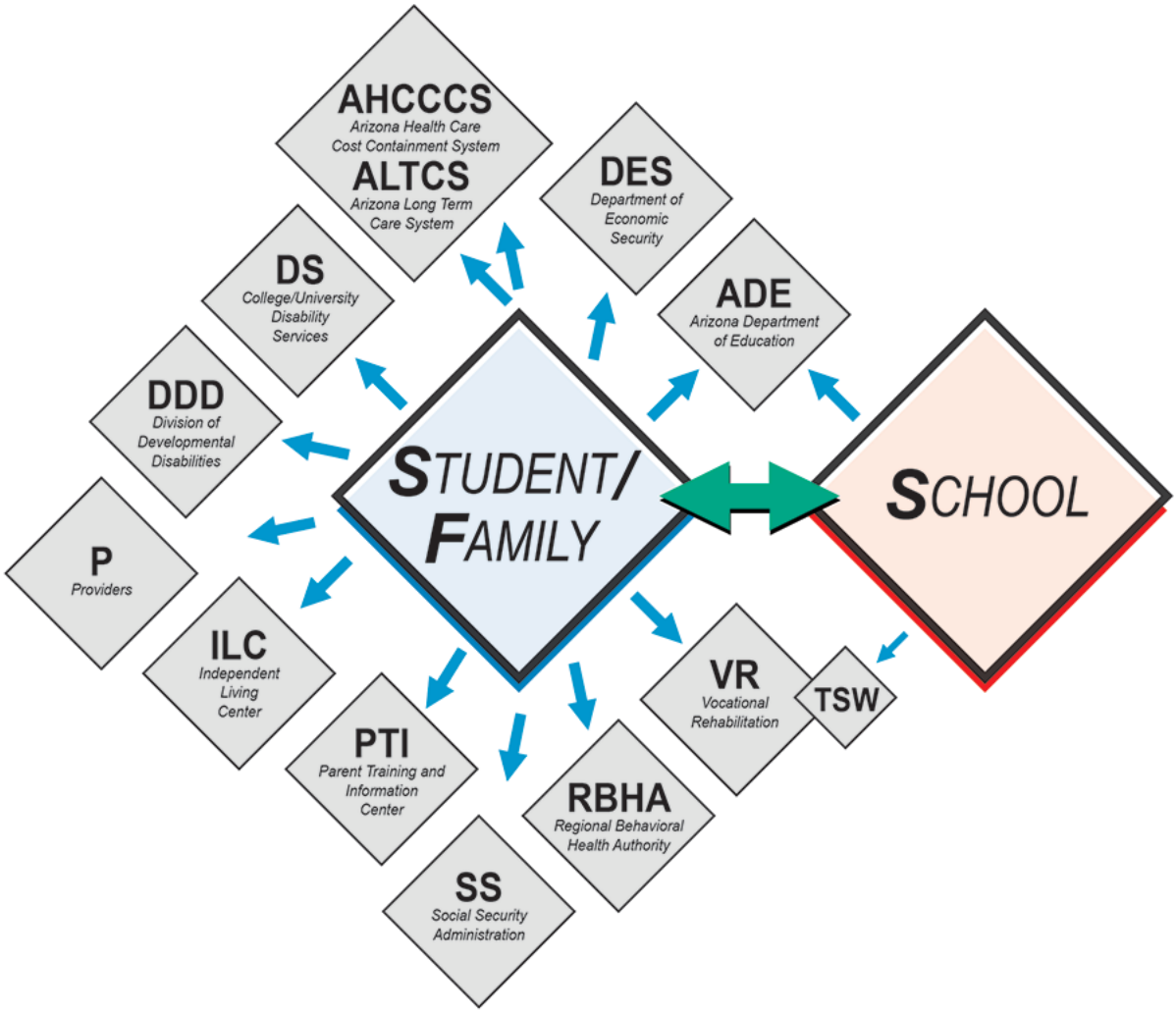
Unfortunately, student roles in the IEP and other decision-making opportunities are often overtaken by those in authority (including parents) for a myriad of reasons, including a lack confidence in student abilities, inadequate time, student apathy, and/or over-protection.

Many do not take leadership in the process. Many students don't speak up, don't know what's in their IEPs, rely on their parents, or just show up at the end of the meetings. Accordingly, in this study a student's control over the IEP process shows little impact on post-school aspirations. Control over the IEP, however, directly impacts how and in what capacity students are involved in their schools – either centrally or peripherally. The lack of student leadership in these areas while in high school foreshadows their minimal involvement and limited success post high school. Schools, families, and youth need to act now to counteract that trend.

finding 5: PARENTS ACCESS TO RESOURCES OFTEN LIMITED

Students with disabilities and their families encounter significantly more stress than their counterparts without disabilities. In addition to medical and therapist appointments, work, transporting children, and managing a family and household, families and students must also acquire a significant amount of information from multiple, disparate sources to ensure a successful education and quality of life. There is not a single phone number to call or a website to access all these services; multiple steps are required. This creates significant barriers to families and students whose options and life choices are dictated by the information they receive. Some are so overwhelmed by the system's complexity they may not access the services that could help them. For example, planning should start before 9th grade to give students time to prepare, plan, and learn the skills necessary to succeed, but parents don't know what services their child is entitled to and when services should start. The majority of the sample did not apply for services until their child was about to graduate. Further, there are 200 public school districts and 500 charter schools operating as their own districts – each with different systems, programs, and policies. And while some schools can provide best practices for other schools, at times these practices are not shared. As a result, some providers find it very difficult to get information and resources across the schools to teachers and families who need them. Further, communication between agencies and schools is a significant problem, partly due to staff turnover and large caseloads.

Accessing State Resources:
This illustration denotes how families initiate services or receive information.



finding 6: SCHOOLS MOVE TOWARDS INCLUSION

According to Arizona Department of Education (ADE) data, in 2006, only 49% of students with IEPs spent at least 80% of their school days inside regular classes. But by 2014, placement in general education settings had increased to 63%. The standard for inclusive education is 80% of students are included in general education classrooms at least 80% of their school days - we still have work to do – but we have also made tremendous progress. While numbers in general education classrooms have improved, this study finds persistent barriers in implementation.

While the majority of students in this study spent their time in integrated settings, those with more significant disabilities were not always offered that choice. Parents of students with disabilities are often counseled on where their child would best fit, which is not always the most desirable option.

Parents expressed concerns and frustration with barriers their children face in accessing programs offered to general education students without disabilities, such as high school level classes in middle school and extra-curricular activities. In some schools, general education students register first, so popular courses fill up before the special education students even register, thus limiting their options. And for those enrolled in inclusive extra-curricular activities, this study finds that many students with disabilities are offered minor roles, if any. If parents and students are unable to gain access to inclusive activities, parents often look to recreational organizations that serve students with disabilities to fill voids in their children's social and recreational lives.

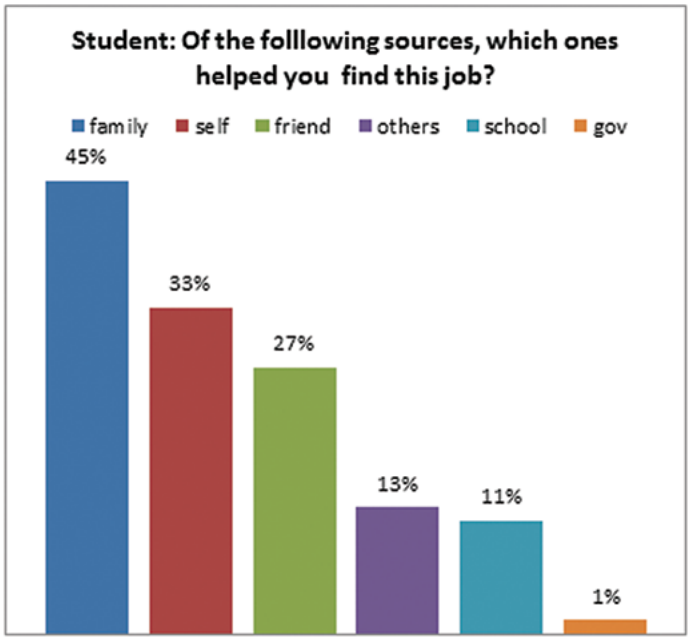
Increasingly, inclusion in the general education classroom without proper supports in place has motivated many parents to look elsewhere for their child's educational needs. Parents of students with and without disabilities are increasingly choosing to participate in charter schools or exit the public school system. As students leave public schools, ADE is unable to track these students' progress to see if the private placement resulted in better outcomes or to track their post-school outcomes altogether. In effect, this segregation and lack of transparency may serve as more barriers to achieving positive post-school outcomes.

> "These were decisions made without me. They have him on distance learning so he's on a computer in the classroom with this teacher...He's on the computer all day long… There's no teacher interaction, student interaction going on for him."
>
> —Parent

discussion

This study finds that the use of informal supports leads to positive education and employment outcomes among youth with all types of disabilities. Youth who find jobs do so primarily through family, friends, and neighbors. Further, rural communities, where local residents tend to know one another, show a higher rate of community employment for students with disabilities. Consequently, those businesses personally invested in participating in school operated community-based work programs tend to personally know someone with a disability.

Social capital are those connections and opportunities that arte leveraged to gain needed resources and achieve desired outcomes. Without social capital the resources and information to which students and parents have access are bounded by the limited options provided through a formal system of programs and services. But, a person-centered plan offers a way out of this bounded system. It identifies the interests, support needs, and current and future aspirations of students. Students and their support teams can use these plans to begin to map out the connections one has to support their aspirations, identify where holes in his/her connections are, and where new connections need to be identified.



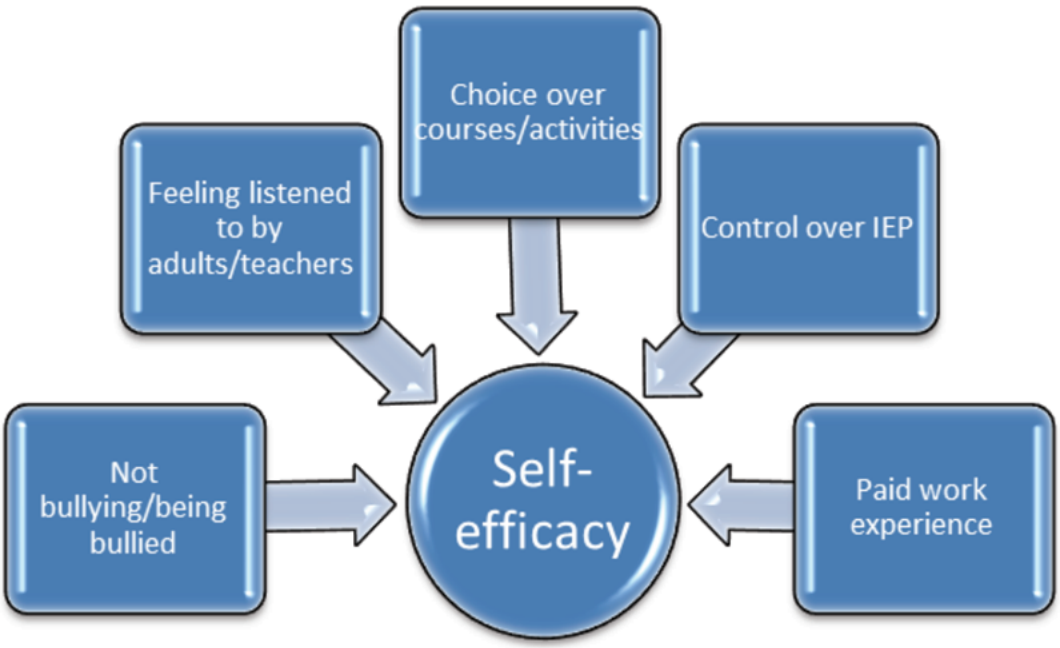
Stronger collaboration among schools, agencies, ADE, and Arizona's institutions of higher education can improve outcomes for transition-age youth. Such activities may include increasing accessibility of college opportunities for youth with disabilities and increasing capacity and technical support for all stakeholders via certifications, programs, and technical assistance.

"We don't want Arizona youth growing up thinking that the end of high school is the end for them. Despite having disabilities, there are very real accommodations that can be put into place so that these young people can be successful in the workforce. And these are conversations that need to happen in grade school, 7th grade, 8th grade, all through high school... and not stop."

—Letitia Labrecque, Administrator, RSA

conclusion

There is a set of variables that education administrators control that show significant positive effects on youth self-efficacy, regardless of the students' disability significance, race/ethnicity, or school location. However, the presence of these conditions in schools varies widely. Study data revealed that districts with youth reporting higher aspirations and greater self-efficacy have one thing in common: A strong belief among district leadership - including school board members, superintendents, and special education directors - in their transition programs and their students' abilities to succeed. This commitment by leadership leads to sustainable best practices in transition, such as person-centered planning, self-determination/self-advocacy training, and IEPs linked to meeting post-secondary goals indicated on student transition plans. In effect, transition programs are not limited to special education, but are part of a school-wide effort and partnership with general education teachers andstaff. Their collective goal is to build academic, vocational education, and employment opportunities among all students.



Arizona's students with disabilities and their families are generally satisfied with their education, but the research results reported here indicate that more needs to be done to address the deficits that exist in societal expectations, work opportunities, and inclusion in school life. The solutions to these dilemmas are both evident and difficult to achieve – raise our expectations of students' potential; enhance their opportunities for genuine inclusion in school and societal activities; and structure a system that provides them with the skills they need to get the jobs they seek. Having a school leadership, parental involvement, and an informal system that supports these efforts can change the paradigm, so that having no expectations for 11% of our high school students is no longer the expectation. Personal relationships that both emotionally bond families facing similar challenges and bridge resources outside of the limited formal support system can help youth, families, and the overall community recognize that all students with disabilities have gifts, and that everyone has a place to contribute to society. Accordingly, teachers, parents, and students should not be afraid to ask friends, neighbors, co-workers, the businesses they frequent, and others for mentoring advice, for an internship, or even for a job. Most community members want to help. They just have never been asked, or don't know how. Properly preparing our youth for life beyond high school is everyone's responsibility.

Established by Governor Janice K. Brewer in 2009, ADDPC develops and supports capacity building and systemic change to increase inclusion and involvement of persons with developmental disabilities in their communities through the promotion of self-determination, independence and dignity in all aspects of life.

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