

# The Graduation Cliff



Improving the post-school outcomes  
of students with disabilities



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## *Improving the Post-School Outcomes of Students with Disabilities*

### PREPARED FOR THE ARIZONA DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES PLANNING COUNCIL

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## Executive Summary

It is critical that high schools are prepared to educate and train the growing number of youth with disabilities for life beyond high school, as one in three young adults with disabilities between the ages of 16 - 24 are not engaged in school or employment. Most recently, the U.S. Department of Education's 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:

- ✓ access to community experiences
- ✓ inclusion in general education
- ✓ interagency collaboration
- ✓ paid employment/work experience
- ✓ parental expectations and involvement
- ✓ self-advocacy/self-determination
- ✓ self-care/independent living skills
- ✓ social skills
- ✓ student support

There is a federal movement to improve student outcomes targeting some of these predictors in several recently launched initiatives, but where does Arizona stand? What are we currently doing to move the needle, and what do we still need to do? This report prepared for the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council has two objectives:

1. Gain an in-depth understanding of the transition process to post-secondary education and employment for youth with disabilities enrolled in special education in Arizona, how NSTTAC predictors are utilized, and if there are differences due to race/ethnicity, gender, or disability;
2. And understand the hopes and dreams of middle school and high school students and their parents, as well as what is currently being done to support these aspirations across the state.

To address these questions, Arizona's 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.

Local control allows each school district to operate its own programs and policies. In response, transition programs varied considerably across the state. Some schools are doing great things in transition, while others are still developing. Overall, students are very hopeful about their futures and are preparing and participating in different activities. However, access to and the quality of preparation and activities vary according to the barriers that are present.

## Barriers to Overcome

Recognizing obstacles from the points of view of diverse stakeholders is the first step towards creating sustainable solutions that promote positive outcomes among our students. The following barriers to transition are consistently reported by teachers, parents, and students.

### Teachers:

- There is a lack of communication and collaboration between agencies.
- Facing funding challenges and attitudinal barriers from employers, there are limited opportunities and resources to build community-based employment.
- Some families do not attend individualized education plan (IEP) meetings or are uninvolved making it difficult to create a person-centered plan.
- Many youth have unrealistic expectations regarding their futures.
- School leadership shows varying degrees of support for transition.

### Families:

- Transition planning often starts too late or does not have an adequate team in place.
- Overwhelmed families do not have adequate information or support.
- Although there is school choice, options available to families and students are often not inclusive.
- Some families feel like they have to aggressively engage the school to get the supports they need.
- The school-sponsored employment opportunities that typically exist are often based in the school setting and are targeted to students with more significant disabilities.

### Youth:

- Youth with disabilities desire having friends and growing their social skills, but lack opportunities and supports to do so; they often rely on social media.
- Although the help of families and teachers is essential to positive post-school outcomes, only half of youth feel listened to by adults.
- Incidents of bullying occur, especially among youth with emotional disabilities, and are directly linked to higher rates of suspension and lower aspirations for the future.
- Youth worry after graduation about finding a job and earning a living; many worry that their parents will disagree with what they want.

- Parents, overall, have lower aspirations for their children than the students do.
- There is limited opportunity for self-determination at school with a perception of limited control over their IEP, school activities, and classes.
- Students report that some special education or general education teachers (if the student is mainstreamed) are unaware of what is in the IEP.

While there is an array of federal initiatives to address many of these barriers, this study finds that the state's infrastructure is not set up to prepare our youth with disabilities or be able to address these initiatives on its own. And with the current limited options that exist in integrated employment, some students get ready to graduate with nothing in place, or many wind up in day training programs because they lack other options.

While some of the solutions are self-evident – *fund the vocational rehabilitation program (VR), change Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) reimbursement rates for individual supported employment, make interagency collaboration an expectation* – this research finds that the formal system itself suffers from a problem of overall lowered expectations for youth with disabilities. Low expectations imposed on students with disabilities contribute to students' low levels of confidence and performance.

## What Is Working

Training current and future education administrators and teachers in best practices in transition can help ameliorate some of the issues, but this research finds that the overall teacher shortage and high turnover continues to be a problem in a state with very low teacher pay. Those districts, providers, and businesses who are actively working to overcome these barriers have one thing in common – leadership's strong belief in students' abilities to work. This commitment by leadership leads to sustainable best practices in transition that combat staff turnover, low pay, and a shortfall in funding for the state's education and employment programs. A culture is created that fosters higher expectations for our youth, more opportunities for student self-determination at home and at school, genuine inclusion in school and community activities, and planning that provides students with the skills they need to get the jobs they seek. This paradigm change guides post-school placements beyond day program participation towards meaningful employment and inclusion in the community.

This study also finds that the use of informal supports more often leads to positive education and employment outcomes among youth with all types of disabilities. Youth that find jobs do so primarily through family, friends, and neighbors. For example, rural areas in which community members know each other have a higher rate of community employment of students with disabilities. As a result, those businesses that are personally invested in participating in school operated community-based work programs tend to know someone



personally with a disability.

Thus, access to social capital, i.e., building a network of people who support the aspirations of the students and parents, should be a part of every transition plan. Parents, students, and teachers should not be afraid to ask people outside of the disability circle - friends, neighbors, co-workers, businesses they frequent, or friends of friends in their field of occupational interest - for mentoring advice, an internship, or even a job. Further, with interconnected personal relationships that both emotionally bond families facing similar challenges and bridge resources outside of the limited formal support system, youth, families, and the overall community may then find opportunities for everyone to contribute – creating a more diverse, inclusive community and promoting post-school outcomes.

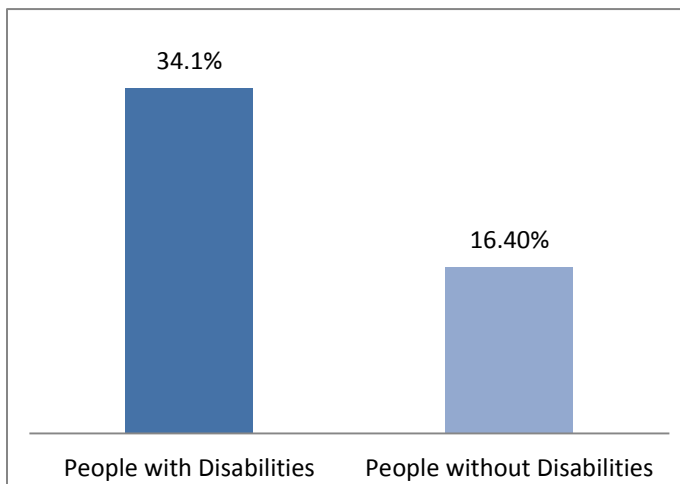
## Introduction

*A child shouldn't start kindergarten and hate school by first grade. They hate school... It's not that they hate school...If they're struggling, they're being called problem children. What does that do for their self-esteem? Then you've got truancy. Then you've got drugs.*

- Parent of 9<sup>th</sup> grade student with multiple disabilities

Arizona faces an emerging trend that has gone largely unnoticed. According to Arizona Department of Education's (ADE) student enrollment numbers, since 2003 the number of special education students, has risen by 25.3% – significantly higher than the 18.6% total growth of the rest of the student population. In fact, the 128,971 special education students enrolled in public education in the 2013 - 2014 school year make up the highest number ever enrolled in special education in Arizona, and this number will only continue to grow as more students are identified for services. 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. Only 12.5% of the special education budget was spent in 2012 - 2013 on vocational technical education for approximately 30% of special education students in area high schools.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Figure 1 demonstrates that more than one-third of these youth remain unengaged in work or education following graduation. In 2013, only 21% of those with disabilities were employed - 40 percentage points less than the 61% without



disabilities.<sup>2</sup> This leaves a substantial number of young Arizonans with few options.

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.

**Figure 1: Arizona Disconnection Rate Ages 16 - 24, 2008-2012**

Source: U.S. Census, 2012, Arizona PUMS (Public Use Microdata Series, American Community Survey)

## Policy Context

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."

### **Integrated, competitive employment:**

Work alongside others with no disability in a community, non-segregated setting that is performed on a full- or part-time basis that is at least equal to the higher of the federal or state minimum wage.

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 spearheaded 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?

Abundant research highlights barriers to achieving successful post-school outcomes. Studies show differences based on disproportionality, i.e., race/ethnicity, school setting, disability type, and gender.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, research suggests that planning should start in

middle school to expose students to a range of career options.<sup>4</sup> However, that is not often the case, and students encounter significant stressors as they transition from primary to secondary school. As schools place more students with disabilities in mainstream classes, issues arise for parents, students, and educators between finding a rhythm in teaching core curriculum at break-neck speed and meeting individualized requirements under IDEA.<sup>5</sup>

## 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.

To address these questions, 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 (The study's methodology with a comprehensive description of study methods and participant demographics are located in Appendix A).

**Social capital:** The social connections and opportunities that are leveraged to gain support and needed information to achieve desired outcomes. In bonding social capital, the individual receives social or emotional support in times of need from those who are close to them. Bridging social capital, in contrast, provides the individual with new information or opportunities, through volunteering or civic engagement, that would otherwise be unknown (e.g., paid work, leisure activities, educational opportunities).

The results find promising practices sprinkled throughout the state amidst significant barriers. Arizona as a whole does not excel in any particular category in preparing its youth to be successful; but in those areas that are successful, the role of social capital is critical. Access to social capital for transition-age Arizonans and other stakeholders (e.g., families, school staff and administrators, policy makers) is

highly relevant as high social capital has been linked to positive long-term outcomes. Particularly, those who have higher social capital have greater access to education,

employment opportunities, physical and mental health outcomes, and well-being.<sup>6</sup>

However, this research finds that not all adolescents experience and utilize social capital with the same effectiveness. Although a variety of personal characteristics influence social capital, institutional and familial/community barriers can serve as impediments. For instance, overall, compared to adolescents without disabilities, students with disabilities experience greater social isolation, more segregated classrooms and programs, and fewer opportunities for integrated, competitive employment - all areas where social capital may develop. However, there are bright spots as well as some families, individuals, and schools learn how to innovate and build social capital for the betterment of their students.

Emergent themes learned from students, families, and professionals are organized in this report by the following NSTTAC indicators, shown in Figure 2. Key interview quotes are categorized and located in Appendix B. Best practices or recommendations to promote each of the Figure 2 indicators are included at the end of most sections. The report concludes with overall findings and recommendations to systemically improve post-school success among youth with disabilities.

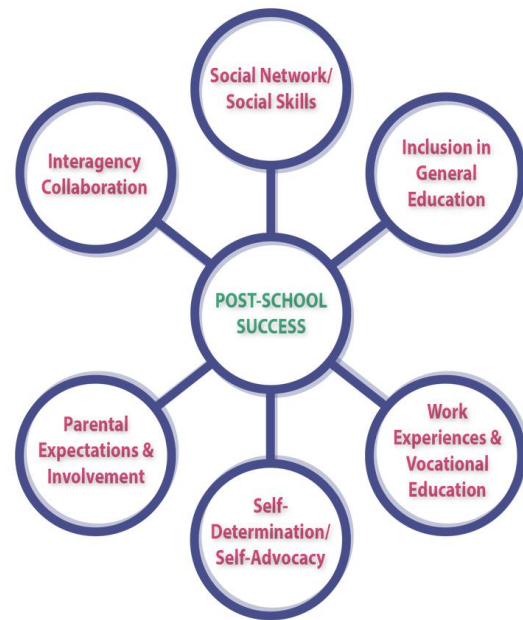


Figure 2: Predictors of Post-School Success

## Interagency Collaboration and Agency Involvement

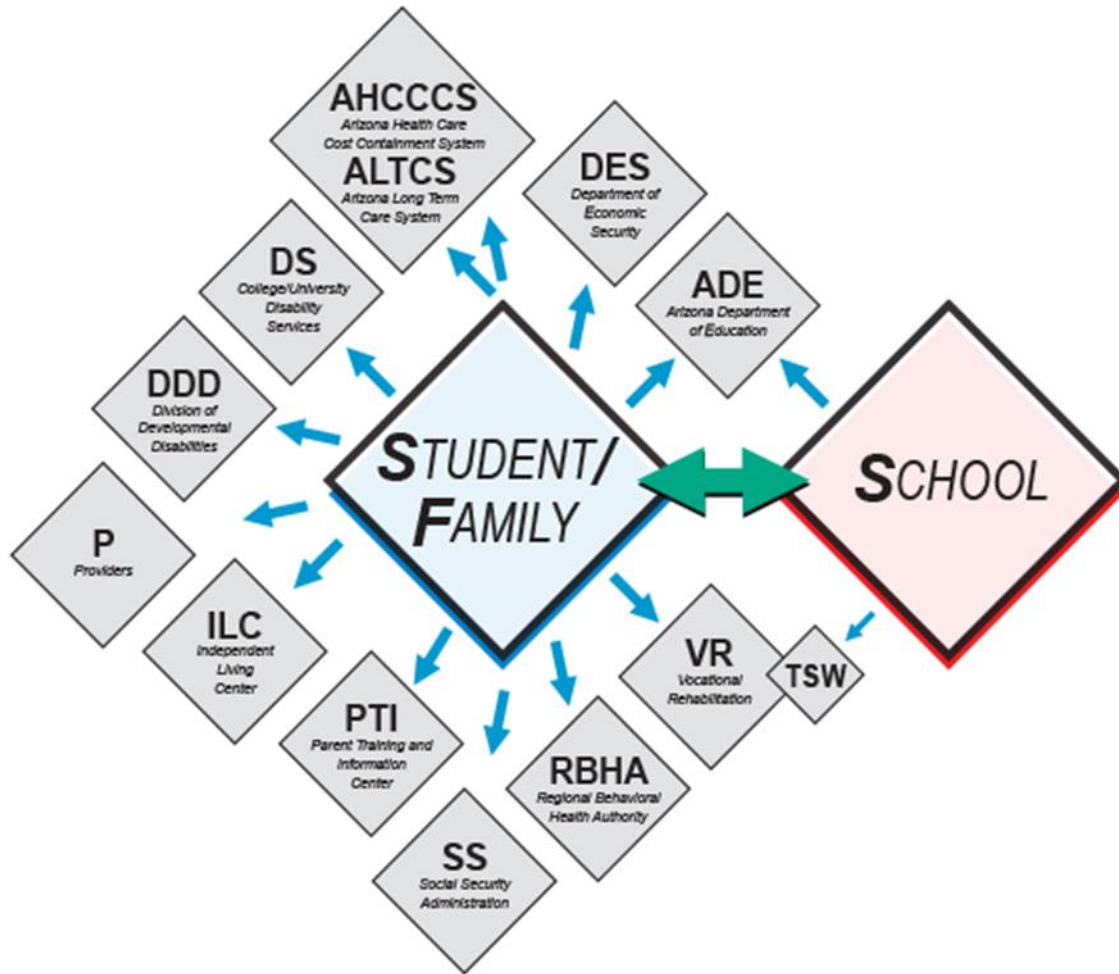
Arizona's network of community-based services and supports for people with developmental disabilities and their families, called the system of care, provides a wealth of resources assuming the family/individual knows how to locate them. For example, DDD is entitlement-based, meaning that there are no wait-lists for services. Further, there are parent training and information centers that help parents learn about the resources available. Many providers are also stepping up to provide employment services to youth who need additional training and experience not provided in some schools. These providers also have valuable resources that help teachers and families in transition planning. Despite all of these available assets, information is sometimes not shared for a number of reasons. This lack of coordination between agencies and families pose tremendous barriers to successful transition from high school to "whatever's next" for students with disabilities.

### Family Role Overload

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. Figure 3 details the entities families are expected to contact before they meet with the schools to discuss their child's future – a daunting task (Note: Agency descriptions are located in Appendix C).

The learning curve is steep for families that have never been exposed to disability services and must start at the beginning. This includes, but is not limited to:

- understanding their rights under IDEA and the IEP process,
- health insurance benefits,
- available assessments for their child,
- which schools best serve their children's needs,
- what types of adaptive equipment/assistive technology are available,
- how to access disability-specific information, respite services and other supports,
- vocational training programs that are offered by many providers,
- and post-school options.



**Figure 3: Accessing State Resources.** The illustration denotes how families initiate services or receive information.

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, thus narrowing their choices. For instance, although it is important to have agencies represented at the student’s annual individualized education plan meetings (IEP) to ensure a comprehensive plan for the student, families often don’t know who to invite. And, some schools don’t encourage invitations to outside parties.

However, some families may unintentionally pose barriers to planning and interagency collaboration by not sharing information about agency involvement. They don’t always want the school to know they have accessed formal services out of fear their child would be stigmatized and excluded by the school. One father chronicles his disheartening experience



when he notified potential schools about his son's bipolar disorder, "...been to school, to school, to school, to school, because, "We don't want your kid. We don't want your kid. We don't want your kid." As a result, some choose not to disclose.

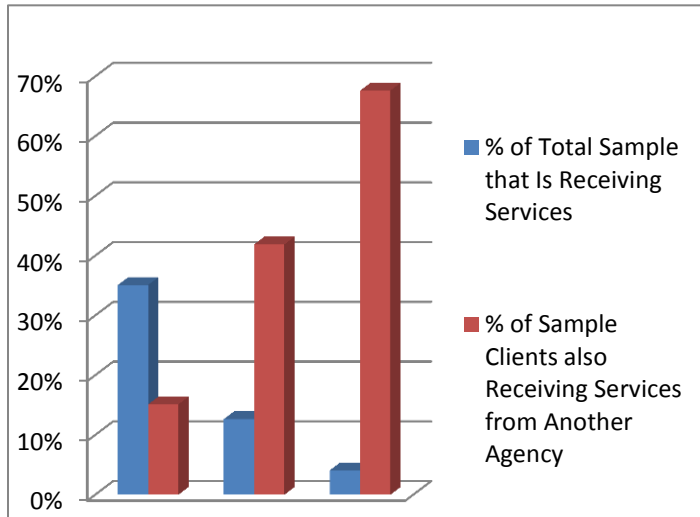
### **Agency Attendance at IEP Meetings**

*The school didn't even suggest that my son have an employment specialist...be at his meetings. They didn't even suggest he have a representative... My support coordinator didn't even suggest it, although we were going through a transition into adult services, but this is a support coordinator we've had for a really long time. So I don't know if parents know.*

-Parent of a high school student with intellectual disabilities

## **Agency Involvement and Collaboration**

The majority of high school youth with disabilities are receiving formal services from an outside agency. In the study sample, 52% of students are receiving transition services from one of three major state government agencies – DDD, VR, and the Regional Behavioral Health Authority (RBHA). These agencies are charged with working together to share information and provide services to eligible students with significant disabilities. Figure 4 shows the percent of students receiving services from two or more agencies. With the exception of the small percentage of RBHA clients, the majority in the sample are not receiving services from more than one agency that could benefit from them. For some, it is



**Figure 4: Agency Involvement of Study Sample**

an eligibility issue, but for many others system fragmentation poses significant barriers to access.

Most agencies report that communication between agencies and with schools is a significant problem due to staff turnover and large caseloads. There is also confusion among agencies involved in interagency agreements over their respective roles when a child

is dually diagnosed. Specifically, is a child's behavioral health diagnosis related to a developmental disability or is it a separate emotional disability? The answer to this critical question draws different funding, programs, and services.



As a result, services become more complicated to navigate. Parents don't know what services their child is entitled to and when services should start. They often do not apply for services until their child is about to graduate or has already graduated. One parent reported playing "mad catch up," trying to coordinate VR in her daughter's senior year, because she had never known who to contact. Figure 5 illustrates the current systemic problem. Planning should start before 9<sup>th</sup> grade to give students time to prepare, plan, and learn the skills necessary to succeed; however, this figure shows that agencies are not involved until much later in the process, if at all.

### School Transitions and Local Control

Agencies find working with the schools complicated by the local control issue. The State Board of Education gives each school district latitude in developing its policies according to its own interpretation of IDEA. In effect, there are 200 public school districts and 500 charter schools operating as their own districts – each with different systems, programs, and policies. This research shows that 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 to teachers and families who need them. So, even if a parent has a choice over schools, they may be limited to the information they receive to make an informed decision.

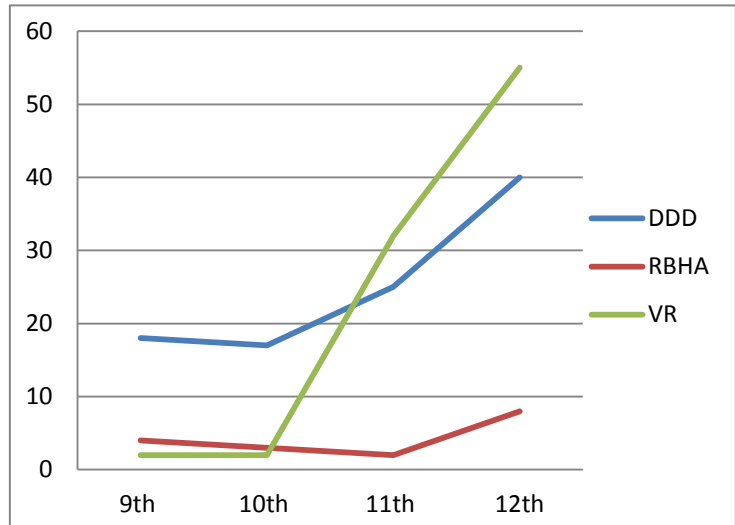


Figure 5: % of High School Study Participants Receiving Agency Transition Services by Grade Level in Study Sample

There are also times when schools simply don't want agencies involved. That is especially problematic for parents of some students with emotional disabilities who need additional support. For example, while schools would benefit from resources provided by behavioral health agencies to assist some students, they don't often access them. Some schools feel providers are issuing even more directives that would require their compliance.

#### On School Behavioral Health Intervention

*Sometimes I think schools, either they don't understand the behavioral health, the teachers don't understand it, or—we're not there to criticize and point fingers and nitpick. We're there to support them. - Behavioral Health Case Manager*

There are also collaboration problems between schools in the same district, which becomes

evident when students are graduating from middle school and transitioning into high school. Some students with disabilities become anxious when they have to change from one teacher to four; one classroom to several; and move to a much larger campus. They are at greater risk for dropping out if they are not transitioned properly. For the most part, families do not feel there is enough time devoted to transitioning their students from middle school into high school to minimize their anxiety. They want their student to have enough time to adjust to their new school and feel like they belong there.

Families report a wide variety of experiences on how middle schools work with area high schools to transition students. Some parents and students report taking tours, working with the Special Education Director, and meeting teachers before school starts. Others report far less comprehensive programs, including insufficient student and teacher preparation and delayed planning. Practices vary from district to district.

## **Best Practices**

Throughout the course of the study, participants shared recommendations to overcome some of the aforementioned information-sharing barriers. In addition, there are formal resources and state-wide initiatives underway to address some of these challenges.

### ***Smoothing the Transition from Middle to High School***

- ✓ The solution to a successful high school transition requires coordination between middle and high school special education departments and general education teaching staff. High school teachers, counselors, extra-curricular activity coordinators, and other students should visit 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to discuss high school, what to expect, questions they have, and tips to succeed.
- ✓ Parents suggest preparing students for high school earlier, e.g., in the eighth grade or the last month of the summer.
- ✓ After freshman year begins, parents and students both state the need for independent case managers, mentors, or peer support provided by the schools to help anxious students effectively deal with the stress of starting high school.

### ***Increasing Parent Information***

- ✓ A resource sheet with organizations, descriptions, websites, and phone numbers can be provided to every family as soon as their child is identified as having a disability.
- ✓ Parents suggest holding periodic forums to bring together teachers, administrators, and parents to problem-solve issues facing youth with disabilities. Space that allows open communication and community-building facilitates better understanding between parties and promotes innovation and collaborative decision-making.
- ✓ There are also state-wide resources to help connect parents to needed information

and support. **Parent Training and Information Centers**

(<http://www.raisingpecialkids.org/>; <http://www.pilotparents.org/ppsa/>) provide training, support and guidance to parents and organizations, as well as opportunities to share personal experiences and perspectives with other families facing similar issues. These programs enhance families' ability to cope and support families' problem-solving by helping them develop awareness of community support. Similarly, MIKID (<http://www.mikid.org/>) provides education, resources, and support to Arizona families of children with behavioral health challenges.

### *Promoting Interagency Collaboration*

- ✓ The **Arizona Community of Practice on Transition (AZCoPT)** consists of agencies involved in Arizona's system of care with the mission to break down silos and improve the life-long outcomes for youth with disabilities transitioning into adulthood. They inform and educate the public and one another on what each agency does; they address unmet needs through collaboration; evaluate the transition process and system; and remove barriers and recommend systemic improvements. Key issue areas include: meaningful youth involvement; increasing post-secondary education options/success; improving employment outcomes; outreach to child welfare/healthcare issues, juvenile justice, and mental health systems; addressing transportation barriers; and procedure and policy review to update/align organizations when possible.
- ✓ A recently awarded federal grant can effect evidence-based system change. Arizona was one of six states to receive the **Achieving Success by Promoting Readiness for Education and Employment (ASPIRE)** grant to promote interagency collaboration and use of NSTTAC practices. It is a grant that is led and housed by ADE's Exceptional Student Services (ESS) and administered over a five-year period by the Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families to parents and children living in poverty. The goal is to determine the efficacy of the program and its impact on post-school outcomes among youth and families on SSI. Some of the interventions include parent and youth training on advocacy, community resources, and educational and employment opportunities. The program also offers paid employment for the student while he or she is still in high school, self-determination training for the student and family, financial management education and training for families, and case management support to guide families through the maze of resources and public benefits. The case manager will also facilitate all of these interventions, as well as interact with school personnel, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and all other providers of services. It can serve as a model to aspire to for Arizona's current transition system.

## Support Network and Social Skills

Social skills, emotional intelligence, and personal habits are important for getting and retaining jobs and are highly predictive of student achievement and post-school employment. Further, providers agree that an absence of communication and social skills, (i.e., soft skills), are the biggest barriers to individuals who desire to attend college or get a job after high school. Research has shown that those students who spend the most time with friends during school have a higher quality of life.<sup>7</sup> And, students with both informal and formal supports and social skills are more likely to land jobs post-high school than those without these supports and skills.<sup>8</sup> However, despite indicators pointing to their importance, they are often the last priorities considered in an academic setting.

### The Desire to Be Included

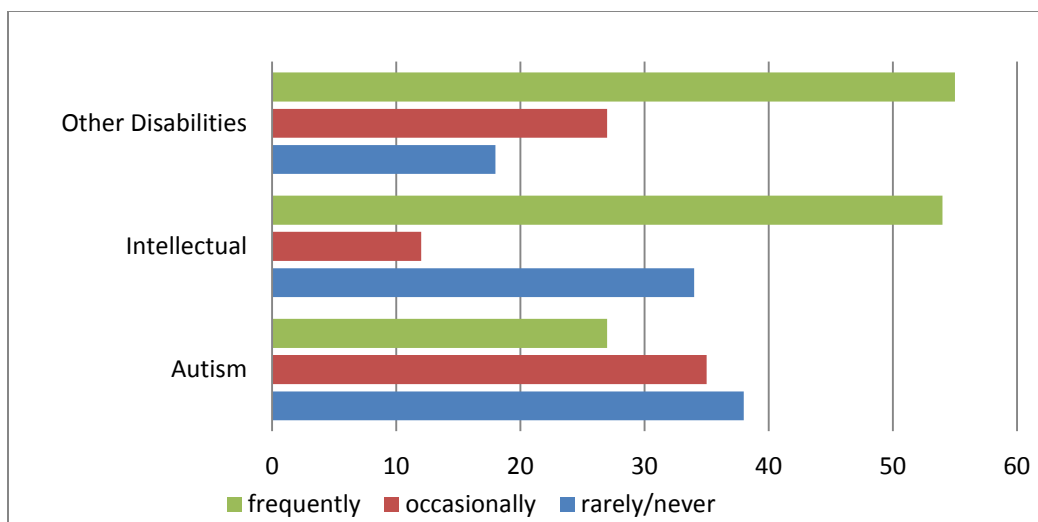
Having friends is important to most teenagers. Students in this study report that friendships offer such benefits as moral and emotional support, protection from bullying, help with homework, and information. And for those transitioning from middle school, the number of friends they have in their new high school becomes extremely important, offering some stability amidst great change. However, some parents cite the difficulty in their children's ability to maintain relationships with friends who live across town or who do not understand their child's behaviors. As a result, some students become very depressed and lonely.

#### On Loneliness

*He gets everything. He's got friends. He's got a life and all I am is me.*

– Student with multiple disabilities discussing his brother's social life

This research finds that the frequency of having contact with friends is predictive of a students' hopefulness for their futures. Despite this finding students with disabilities are overwhelmingly unable to hone their social skills inside or outside of school and are more isolated than others. Almost half of study participants, 47%, talk to friends outside school less than once a week; 22% rarely or never talk to friends outside of school. And, there is a difference by disability. Figure 6 shows that a high percentage – about one in three - of those with intellectual disabilities and autism stated that they 'rarely' or 'never' interact with friends outside school.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 6: How often have your high school friends contacted you at home? (% of students in study sample)**

Further, only slightly more than half are involved in school-related, extra-curricular activities – an excellent venue to make friends. For some, the costs of equipment and supplies become an unmanageable burden. Parents expand on the barriers to school activity involvement citing bullying by other students, a lack of support and understanding, and failure to make accommodations. With so many other barriers facing families, involvement in extra-curricular activities becomes the last priority.

#### **Barriers to Social Involvement**

*I don't know what club I could put him in that somebody understands his limitations or can see his strengths and be able to play off of those things. Do I have to go to club too, so that he can be in a club? I don't know. I work eight to five, how do I help him with a club?*

–Parent of a student with multiple disabilities

For the many uninvolved in clubs or outside activities, there are limited opportunities to socialize outside of school. Social media and access to technology becomes very important for these youth to maintain friendships and build social skills. This study finds that a high proportion of this population is digitally connected with almost four in five connected to social media, although those with significant disabilities reported less use. Further, the use of technology is significantly associated with peer contact. Those who do not use technology are four times more likely to never have contact with peers. This isolation adversely impacts those with more significant disabilities who have less access to social media.

### **The Bullying Effect**

It is no surprise, with the large percentage of socially disconnected students, that bullying is a serious problem among students with disabilities that needs to be addressed. Nearly one

in five students reports being bullied or picked on by other students at least once a week. Parents give a higher number – 38%. Some disability groups are targeted more than others. Students with autism are 3 ½ times more likely to be bullied than other students with disabilities; but for those with emotional disabilities, the difference is even more dramatic. Those with emotional disabilities are **seven times** more likely to be bullied than others with disabilities and **four times** more likely to be physically attacked.

Almost every school has bullies. As a result, some students feel like they must hide their disability to fit in. Others look for others like themselves and befriend them. For example, parents of students with intellectual disabilities and autism report that most of their child’s friends have similar disabilities. Some simply give up on making friends with other students.

**On Being Bullied**  
*I'm going into the special ed advisory.  
And the other kids are questioning,  
“What's that? Are all the kids in there  
retarded? Are you retarded with them,  
too?”*  
-Student with Traumatic Brain Injury

This research finds that bullying has a significant negative effect on students’ future aspirations, self-efficacy, and school performance. These repeated, negative experiences of bullying make it difficult for them to fit comfortably into “the world” post-graduation. Those who are bullied believe they are less likely to graduate high school or support themselves financially after graduation than those who have not been bullied. Further, bullying leads to fighting, or what student participants stated is “self-defense.” Being attacked or involved in fights at school are predictive of being suspended or expelled. This is a significant problem among students with disabilities, with **25% of students** in the family sample having been suspended. Those with emotional disabilities are **ten times more likely** to be suspended than others with disabilities. This negatively impacts their expectations to graduate high school or college and, for some, it is the beginning of the pipeline into the juvenile justice system.<sup>10</sup>

**Being Bullied Can Lead to Suspension**  
*He was getting picked on by other students....since we weren't getting no results from the teachers, I told him to defend himself. Then, that ended up getting him in trouble. When he tries to defend himself, he's labeled as the bad kid.*  
-Parent of students with emotional disabilities

## **The Importance of Teacher Support and Mentors**

These aforementioned findings and examples underline the need for positive support and socialization so these students with disabilities don’t feel the need to hide or fight back. Access to both informal and formal support is essential to student success. Both parents and students noted a need for mentors – one for the student and one for the parent – in

helping them throughout school and navigating post-high school options. Specific to transition to life beyond high school, students are seeking help from adult mentors with financial aid, college applications, scholarships, and other tasks to help them achieve their career goals. Figure 7 shares the percentage of students that report who is helping them get ready for life after high school.

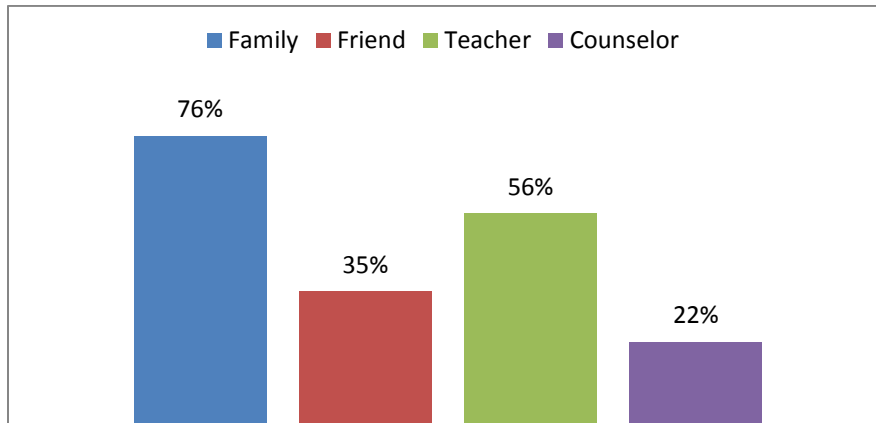


Figure 7: Who is helping you get ready for life after high school (% of students in study sample)

Three out of four Arizona youth with disabilities report that their families are helping them get ready for life after high school. Following parents/family, teachers play the second largest role in students’ lives followed by friends. Help from teachers and school counselors serve as a positive influence and buoy students’ hopes for their futures. Some of the ways in which students say teachers help them are through tutoring, paying attention and listening to them, supporting them, helping them with problems, and providing them with information on how to reach their goals. Outside of teachers and informal supports, students and families often turn to counselors. Providers are not as frequently mentioned; however referrals to counseling services and providers often come from teachers, affirming the critical role they play in the lives of students and families.

With different teachers come different personalities - some are more supportive than others. Half the students surveyed feel adults listen to them “only a little,” if at all. For those with

**Teachers Make School Life Better for Students**  
*If you have good relationships with teachers, you can pretty much go through high school like nothing.*  
 - Student

more significant disabilities, only 30% feel listened to “very well.” The culture of the classroom and the students’ perceptions of the teacher can inhibit or support students’ access to help and perception of feeling listened to. In some classrooms students are too embarrassed to ask for help. In other classrooms teachers may forget or delay getting back to the students who do ask for help, impacting students’ abilities to complete assignments correctly and on-time. Both students and parents, feel less likely to ask for or get help or support from teachers perceived as inflexible, strict, non-

understanding, or uncaring.

## Best Practices

There are two approaches that can build supportive school environments that promote students' social inclusion and positive supports:

- ✓ School-wide staff training in **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** (<http://pbisaz.org/pbis-overview/>) promotes a positive school climate and is linked to significant positive outcomes. It reduces bullying, the use of restraints and seclusions, school suspensions, and expulsions among youth with behavior health needs, and is very effective in reducing teacher time dealing with discipline issues. It improves student academic and behavioral outcomes by: manipulating the environment to prevent problem behavior; teaching and encouraging pro-social behaviors; implementing evidence-based behavioral practices; and screening and monitoring student performance and progress continuously. PBIS results in a less reactive, dangerous, and exclusionary environment by providing the necessary supports for students whose behaviors require specialized assistance.
- ✓ Several participants are also deeply involved in school life and leadership activities through the support of peer mentors. In this study, several youth were connected to Best Buddies Arizona (<http://www.bestbuddiesarizona.org/>) and Special Olympics Arizona (<http://www.specialolympicsarizona.org>), peer mentoring organizations that create opportunities for one-to-one friendships and recreational opportunities between students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities. Peer mentoring ensures that all students are included in school-life. It may be initiated formally through the school or other non-profit groups, or informally through neighbors, family friends, and other acquaintances. There are also cross-disability and disability-specific parent mentoring organizations available across the state.



## Inclusion in General Education

Before IDEA was adopted in 1975, students with disabilities were typically educated in specialized schools for children with disabilities, at home or, in some cases, not at all. In response, IDEA mandates that student instruction be provided, to the extent possible, in a general education setting, or, at a minimum, in the least restrictive environment. Numerous studies have shown the benefits of being included in the general education classroom alongside students without disabilities, such as higher achievement, increased likelihood of living independently, getting a job, and attending college.<sup>11</sup> Arizona has increased the percentage of students with disabilities placed in integrated environments over the past eight years. According to ESS data from ADE, 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.<sup>12</sup> While numbers in general education classrooms have improved, this study finds persistent barriers in implementation.

### Integrated Classes, But Limited Opportunities

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. As a result, many students befriend other students with disabilities in these programs - a positive outcome - but they continue to be excluded from mainstream social activities.

#### **Barriers to Access Lead to Segregated Programs at Personal Expense**

*Eddy wants to be an actor, but he could never get into drama. My only alternative was to send him to a private drama camp for students with disabilities. Why should I be having to pay \$700 when we have a public school—where you're supposed to be providing it for him all the time? He doesn't have the same access as the other kids at his own school, because they don't think that he can do the things. – Parent of a student with intellectual disability*

## School Choice or the New Segregation?

Arizona prides itself on school choice, but these choices are not the same for students with certain disabilities when compared to students without disabilities. 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. Some parents feel a loss of control on where their students are educated. Some believe students without IEPs are getting preferential treatment, more attention, and are being pipelined to better schools than students with IEPs. Parents of students with disabilities are often counseled on where their child would best fit, which is not always the most desirable option.

### Some Parents Feel Loss of Control with School Placements

*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. This is so different for him from what he was doing from second grade to eighth grade in an ED (emotional disability) classroom. There's no teacher interaction, student interaction going on for him.*

– Parent of an entering freshman with multiple disabilities

Figure 8 shows the difference by disability type regarding the students' enjoyment of school and parental satisfaction with the overall education they receive in the study sample. Generally parents report that their child enjoys school – especially parents of students with intellectual disabilities. Parents of students with emotional disabilities rate the education their child receives the lowest among the four groups, with one in three indicating they aren't satisfied with the overall education their child received and that their student didn't enjoy school. Some of these students have been suspended or are in self-contained classrooms. The fit of the educational environment can be difficult for the student.

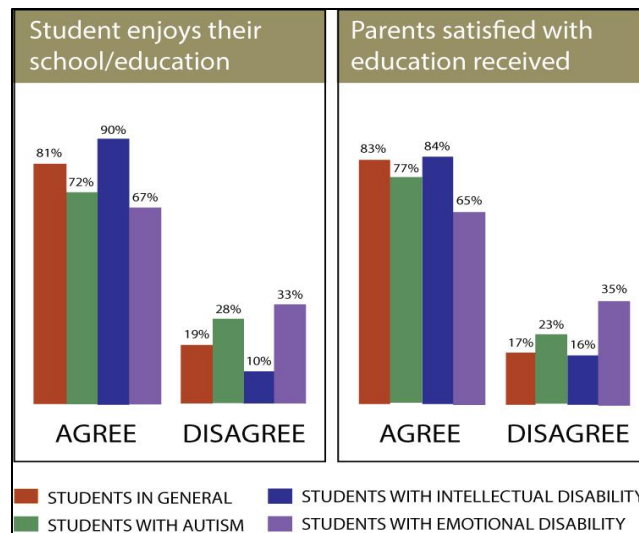


Figure 8: Student/Parent Satisfaction with Education in Study Sample

For example, as Figure 8 shows, one in four parents of students with autism are unsatisfied with their child's education. Some parents and students have difficulty finding a balance between small enough classes that won't cause anxiety and challenging coursework. As a result, some parents move their child to specialized or individualized programming that caters to the student's disability but removes them from inclusive general education environments that are important to successful post-school outcomes.

### **Parents who Choose to Exit – The Use of Charter Schools and Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs)**

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 through ESAs. Charter schools are often smaller than district schools, and as a result parents feel that they have more influence in helping to set their child's educational goals, and the curriculum is more individualized. Unfortunately, smaller charters can also mean less access to resources. In a national review of charter performance with students with disabilities in 2012,<sup>13</sup> the Government Accountability Office found that schools were publicizing and offering special education services, but officials at half of the schools said "insufficient resources" were a challenge. Often, parents were directed to look elsewhere for their child's educational needs. Thus, students with disabilities were underrepresented in charter schools (8%) when compared to public schools (11%).

In Arizona, this same troublesome trend is occurring. In 2013, Arizona charter schools had a slightly better representation of students with disabilities (9.8%), but it was still below the state average of students with disabilities in traditional public schools (11.7%).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Arizona charter schools only allocate only 4.6% of their budgets on special education, whereas districts spend almost four times that amount, or 16.7% of their budgets.<sup>15</sup> To try to remedy the situation, the U.S. Department of Education recently issued guidance on the topic reminding charters that they have the same obligations as regular public schools to ensure that students with disabilities receive proper supports they need under federal law, and they are not discriminated against in the admissions process or in regard to discipline.<sup>16</sup>

With limited options, some parents apply to ESAs in search of better ways to educate their child. The ESA is a parent controlled bank account established to provide funding for an education for qualified disabled and non-disabled students. The ESA program allows parents of eligible students to utilize public monies and purchase numerous educational services rendered solely through and by private individuals, vendors and schools. According to ADE,

most ESA recipients (75%) are guardians of students with disabilities.<sup>17</sup> The number of enrollments of students with disabilities is projected to explode to over 700% with expenditures well over 900% in only three short years. Almost 10% of state funding allocated to special education is projected to be diverted to private options in 2015. This poses a real cause for concern for the students who are left behind as well as for the students who leave.

Segregated day schools that serve students with disabilities and take ESAs have sprung up in response to demand. Some argue that these schools as well as home schools run contrary to the ideals of IDEA, which promise a least restrictive environment and access to the general education curriculum to fully prepare students for life beyond high school. Parents who utilize these options want to ensure that their children are safe, they receive an appropriate education from educators and staff who are trained, and that their children receive the necessary supports to thrive to the best of their abilities, which they feel are missing in today's school environment.

By and large, most special education students are staying in traditional public schools. But if the trend of school choice continues, many may choose to exit traditional public schools with access to general education curriculums into specialized schools that cater to specific disabilities. As students leave public schools, ADE ESS is unable to track these students' progress to see if the ESA-funded instruction actually 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.

## Work Experiences and Vocational Training

Between 2012 and 2022, figure 9 indicates that 67% of projected job growth in Arizona will require only a high school diploma or, for some jobs, no diploma at all. Food preparation, customer services, retail, and construction will see the largest growth. While many view this as problematic for Arizona’s future, it creates opportunities for some with disabilities who have a more difficult time succeeding in post-secondary education.

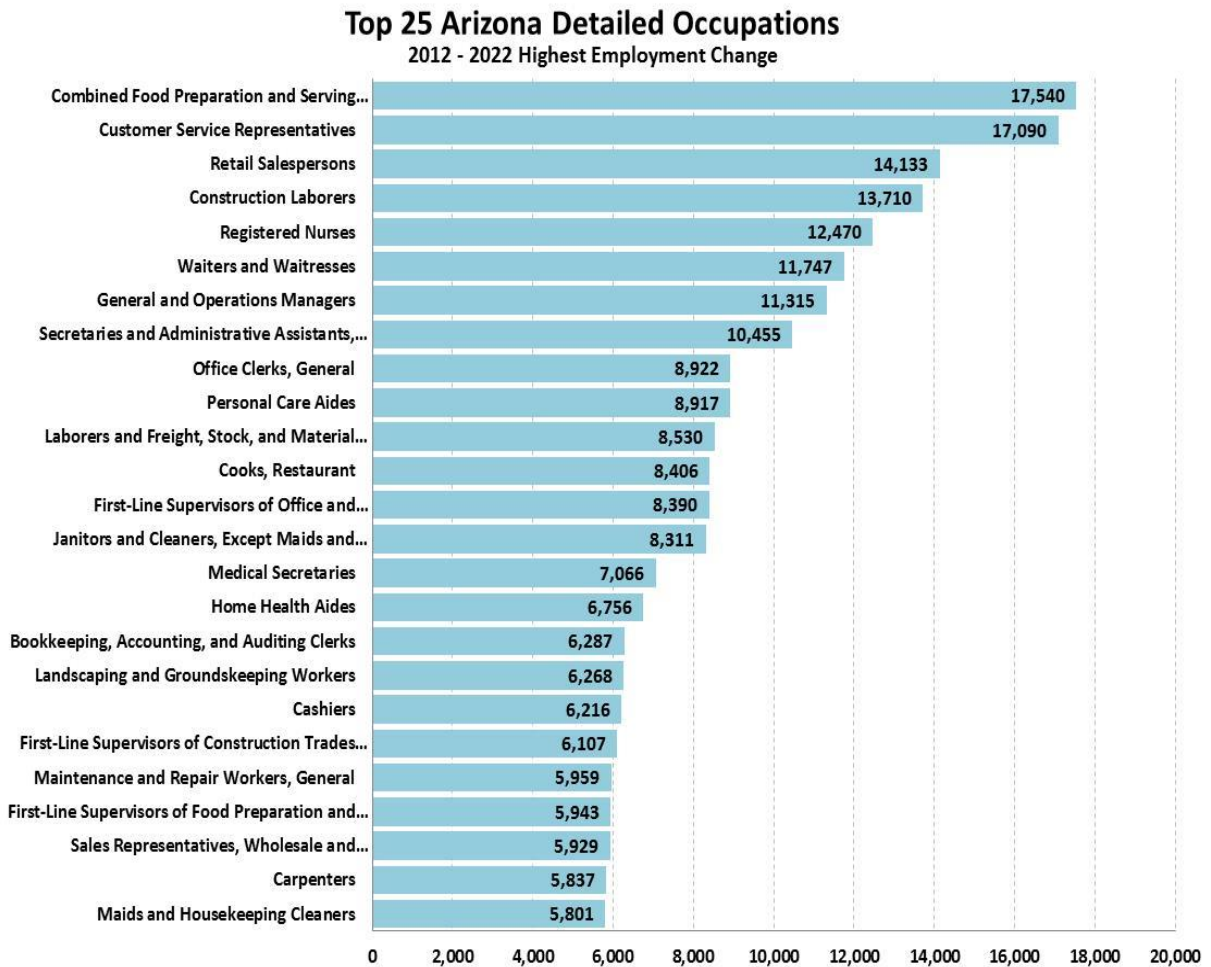


Figure 9: Source - Arizona Department of Administration, Office of Employment and Population Statistics, 2012-2022

Arizona schools increasingly expose students to career exploration activities beginning in high school – in some cases as early as middle school and in others as late as their junior or senior year.<sup>18</sup> Students take career interest inventories, enroll in career exploration classes, and learn how to write resumes, interview, and apply for jobs. As a result, most students included in this study know what they want to do when they graduate from high school. Those that don’t are actively searching for a career path. On average, across all grades, 94% of youth study participants are thinking about their futures and, by senior year,

approximately 83% know what they need to do to achieve their personal goals and feel ready for the futures.

Careful planning of transition activities during high school results in positive post-school outcomes. Work experiences and vocational training offer the opportunity to build soft and problem-solving skills, providing students with expertise in a trade to help them find and maintain a job. The positive effects of having a paid job among high school students with disabilities are impressive.<sup>19</sup> And, there is no difference in this positive effect by the significance of the student’s disability. Students with paid work believe that, after finishing 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.

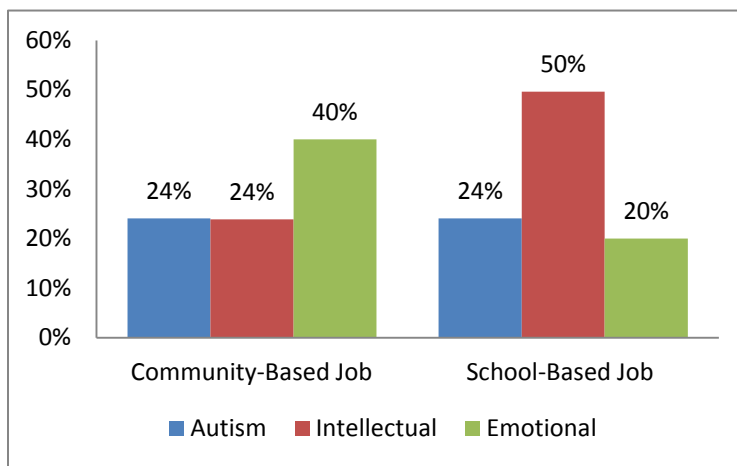


Figure 10: Job Setting by % of Disability Group in Study Sample

Schools are invested in providing students the opportunities to gain job skills, including offering their students opportunities at school. Some have started school-based businesses working with the community and some are partnering with employers in the community to offer internships and jobs. Figure 10 shows participation rates by disability group in school and community-based jobs in the study sample. As

indicated, school jobs are targeted to students with intellectual disabilities with access to supports in one place. Some educators have been creative on how they allocate these school jobs, connecting students to staff mentors in various occupations across the campus. Still, Arizona schools struggle to provide students the skills needed to succeed in the workplace and college. As a result, some resourceful families and students find work for themselves, often through informal networks or by creating their own jobs.

### What Youth Are Doing Now: Leveraging Personal Connections

Half of the youth study participants hold some type of job. However, only one in four of these jobs are provided through the school, and they are targeted to those with primarily significant disabilities. School jobs tend to service the school population and are narrow in scope. While many of these jobs appear to be menial, they are within Arizona’s projected high growth job areas that primarily entail low wage positions. School-based jobs mentioned in this study include working in the school store, helping in the school cafeteria, cleaning

school bathrooms and other janitorial tasks, landscaping the school grounds, working in a copy/print shop, and delivering mail. While these school-based jobs help students acquire some needed skills, the temporary, training nature of these positions does not allow students to hold these jobs permanently. Alternatively, community-based jobs offer a wider path of career exploration as well as more opportunities for permanent employment.

Families are resourceful and help create job opportunities for their children. Figure 11 demonstrates students' reliance on friends, family, and themselves to find paid jobs in the community – only 11% of community jobs are provided through the schools. Participants living in rural areas or towns are 1.7 times more likely than those who live in the suburbs or the city to have a paid job. In many cases individuals are encouraged to start their own

businesses, such as landscaping, home repair, or babysitting. In fact, **over half of the jobs held in the community by individuals with disabilities are entrepreneurial.**

Almost all of the student participants in the study

are engaged to some degree in the community.

In the absence of jobs, students participate in volunteer opportunities – 39% of students not employed are engaged in volunteer activities to gain job skills.

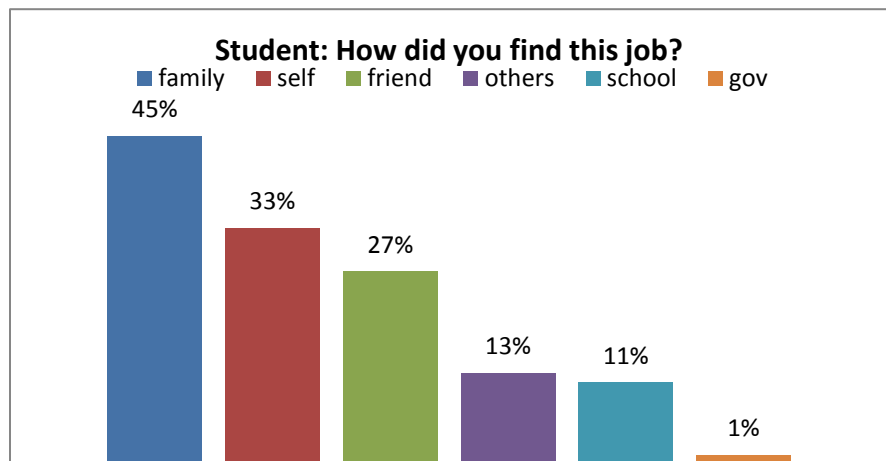


Figure 11: Job Referral Source by % of Student Job Holders in Study Sample

### Student Reason for Volunteering

*I've started volunteering with my martial arts dojo, which is a big part of my life there. That's a community that I like being a part of. It may also develop into a job as an instructor there some time in the future.* – High School Student with intellectual disabilities

## Community-Based Jobs and School Barriers

Recognizing the importance of community-based employment for acquiring real job skills, networking with employers, and potential job placements, many schools are linking employers and students through transition programs, or creating their own school-based businesses, sometimes in partnership with the community. Increasingly, schools are moving away from setting sheltered employment and day treatment centers as the final goal for high school graduates with developmental disabilities.



	School-Based	Community-Based
<i>restaurant</i>	43	38
<i>store clerk/stocker</i>	18	50
<i>copy center/ mailing</i>	11	0
<i>janitorial</i>	10	15
<i>landscaping*</i>	7	43
<i>instructing/tutoring</i>	7	3
<i>custodian/laborer*</i>	5	16
<i>recycling</i>	3	0
<i>community events</i>	2	5
<i>administrative</i>	1	2
<i>computer/tech</i>	1	2
<i>animal care*</i>	1	14
<i>construction</i>	1	14
<i>car wash</i>	1	3
<i>civic oriented/political</i>	1	2
<i>health care</i>	1	4
<i>photography</i>	1	2
<i>babysitting*</i>	0	78
<i>auto repair</i>	0	11
<i>family business</i>	0	9
<i>amusement park</i>	0	5
<i>day care</i>	0	3
<i>craft*</i>	0	2
<i>theater</i>	0	2
<i>agriculture/farming</i>	0	1
<i>parking</i>	0	1
<i>delivery</i>	0	1
<i>plumbing</i>	0	1
<i>cosmetology</i>	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>328</b>

Table 1 lists the types of jobs held by students in this study. Students working in the community report positive experiences. The Transition from School to Work (TSW) program, jointly funded by VR and partnering school districts, is invaluable to high school youth. TSW assists students with the most significant disabilities in 22 school districts throughout Arizona by providing job training and locating 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 VR program with a \$4 federal match for every state dollar spent. However, Arizona does not allocate enough state dollars to obtain a full federal match that would expand this program to all students who could benefit. As a result, there is difficulty obtaining VR services for some youth.

**Table 1: Number of Student Employees by Job Classification in Study Sample**

**\*Self-employment/Entrepreneurial**

clients with the most significant disabilities. Those with less significant disabilities are placed on an indefinite wait list. As a result, school personnel have a difficult time finding students considered “disabled enough” to receive services, or the subjective process of determining disability significance may deem a person who may be capable of working as unemployable.

Over 100 districts that serve high school youth have to leverage community partnerships on their own if they want to offer community-based employment. Some transition coordinators are better at leveraging community relationships than others, so the number of businesses involved differs from one school to another within the same district. Businesses that join

Due to budget shortages, there is an order of selection in place that requires VR to only serve those



these partnerships often have a personal connection to disability. They understand the barriers these students face as well as their potential. Managers involved have stated it has helped them become better leaders.

One of the frustrations among job developers is the high staff turnover they experience with the business human resources (HR) community, which affects the developer's ability to place workers with disabilities successfully. For example, if an HR professional who has a good relationship with a job developer leaves, the job developer has to start over in building the relationship with the new HR person. This entails training the new HR person and breaking the stereotype of what disability is. Further, there are problems with funding and staffing that impede the ability for teachers to job search and job develop for their students.

### **Budget Impacts on Transition Programs**

*The schools ....they used to do a little bit more, maybe help the student work part time in the community somewhere, ... now they work for a couple of hours in the school library or the school cafeteria or landscaping the school grounds, it's just a very different setting.*

– State Agency Staff

Some schools are trying to increase community networking and opportunities for students by creating school-based businesses that serve the community. Coconino High School in Flagstaff offers several paths for vocational training and employment that involve the community. The **Community Free Store**, operated by students, accepts donated items and distributes them to community members in need. Not only does this venture teach students how to work in retail, but they interface with the community and learn social responsibility.

### **Career and Technical Education: An Underutilized Path**

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, which may be funded through local, state, and/or federal funds, target 'hands-on learning' and expertise in a specific trade in high school are an underused resource among students with disabilities with many students unaware of these programs. Previous research demonstrates positive outcomes for students who take CTE courses. Involvement in these programs results in students being twice as likely to obtain full-time jobs after high school than students not involved. CTE program involvement also results in higher pay and a higher high school graduation rate.<sup>20</sup> Students with disabilities enrolled in these programs enjoy them because they are learning to do what they love to do. Youth with mild to moderate disabilities recognize this option as a potential path for them – seven in 10 say they plan to graduate or are already enrolled in a trade program.

CTE staff stated that they continue to face attitudinal barriers from some teaching staff when enrolling students with disabilities. Some are unaware of the important role that accommodations can play in ensuring that students with disabilities are successful in a

career path. Cliff Migal, Assistant Superintendent of West-MEC, described levels of certification in certain career fields where some students with disabilities could not meet the requirements. For example, if the student uses a wheelchair and wants to work on airplanes, they would not be able to do that particular job because of its inaccessibility; however, the student could still work in the field of aviation mechanics within the power plant. Most jobs can be adapted or jobs within the student's desired field can be located. Thus, educating others in the field about accommodations is critical to removing barriers to access to CTE and other training programs.

### **Starting the Accommodation Conversation Early**

*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 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, all through high school...and not stop.*

--Letitia Labrecque, Administrator, VR programs

## **The Barriers of Transportation**

Transportation continues to be a barrier to employment program access. With tight district budgets, families must look beyond the schools to provide the necessary transportation so students can have employment experiences. State agency representatives report that often families who live in rural areas don't follow up on employment services because there is little transportation to get their child to job sites or programs. As a result, study participants living in rural areas are 40% less likely to receive formal services than participants living in suburban or urban settings.

In addition, transportation is not provided for jobs and programs that are not school-based, including CTE training sites. In some cases transportation may be funded by the school district, but for programs not prevalent across district lines, students are required to provide their own transportation.

## **Best Practices**

Some families and students have paved their own path for employment. A personal relationship with an employer can provide access into an entry-level position that allows for trial and error for an employee. This also provides opportunities for the student to learn on the job skills, make his or her own decisions, and understand the consequences of those decisions. These experiences help the student identify appropriate accommodations that are needed to ensure job retention and success.

There are also several organizations that are addressing the employment barriers facing students with disabilities; however, these programs are only available to those with access

to transportation. Many of these programs expose students to different career paths to help them decide what they want to do as well as improve their problem-solving and soft skills.

- ✓ As previously discussed, the **TSW program** operated in partnership with VR in 22 districts throughout the state is one such program.
- ✓ **Project Search** (<http://www.projectsearch.us/>) prepares transition-aged youth with intellectual disabilities for competitive employment. The program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills to help youth with significant disabilities make successful transitions from school to productive adult life. The Project SEARCH model involves an extensive period of training and career exploration, innovative adaptations, long-term job coaching, and continuous feedback from teachers, job coaches, and employers. As a result, at the completion of the training program, the goal is for students with disabilities to be employed in non-traditional, complex, and rewarding jobs. The presence of a Project SEARCH High School Transition Program can bring about long-term changes in business culture that have far-reaching positive effects on attitudes about hiring people with disabilities and the range of jobs in which they can be successful.
- ✓ Some agencies recognize disability-specific barriers and help students to overcome them. For example, many of the participants in this study who have autism participated in the **Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC)** (<http://www.autismcenter.org/>) pre-employment programs called CommunityWorks (e.g. LibraryWorks, GoodDeedWorks, PowerWorks) that help participants with and without autism build their independent living skills, soft skills, and job skills by working with community non-profits.

To expand these opportunities for students with disabilities, parents and community members should encourage city leaders to expand opportunities and provide business and tax incentives to welcome inclusive businesses. Positive publicity of these efforts and grant-funded initiatives can ensure that there are employment opportunities available for these youth that not only provide important job training skills, but also educate employers about working with employees with disability.

#### **What Employers Should Know about Hiring 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, and Organizational Development, Medtronic

## Parental Expectations and Involvement

While the study finds that the majority of parents are involved, one in four youth report no help from their parents. The importance of parents in the lives of their children cannot be over-stated. Their involvement and expectations help chart the course for students' futures. Previous research has demonstrated that parental involvement and encouragement of students to participate in activities that increase student determination skills (i.e., social activities, chores, jobs) result in a higher likelihood of employment during school and post school, greater academic achievement, and greater student self-determination.<sup>21</sup>

This study finds that the majority of parents surveyed assist students by advocating for them; encouraging and supporting them; transporting them; helping them with their homework; facilitating social, leisure, and work opportunities; and accessing information, resources, and supports to optimize their health and quality of life. They are also involved in their child's school. In the past year 86% of parents attended a school meeting and 79% attended a school or class event - that percentage did not vary by student disability; however, only 30% of parents volunteered at the school. It is difficult to ask parents to do more. There is a long list of everything they are expected and desire to do for their loved ones, but they - like the schools - struggle to find their way in a fragmented, over-stretched, and poorly funded system that overall expects little from their sons and daughters.

### Some Family Support Received Connected to Lowered Expectations for Youth

The need and demand for family support is universal – across all disabilities and ages. Families feel lost in a very complex system. Over half of our parent sample receives some type of informal support from friends and neighbors; they are just not getting help often. Figure 12 shows that about 31% of parents receive help with their student at least 2 to 3 times per month. The most frequent requests for informal help are including the student in recreational opportunities (54%) and socializing with them (52%). Other uses of support include information and advice on supporting youth (39%) and help with transportation (38%), the most critical to family involvement. Those parents who have informal help with

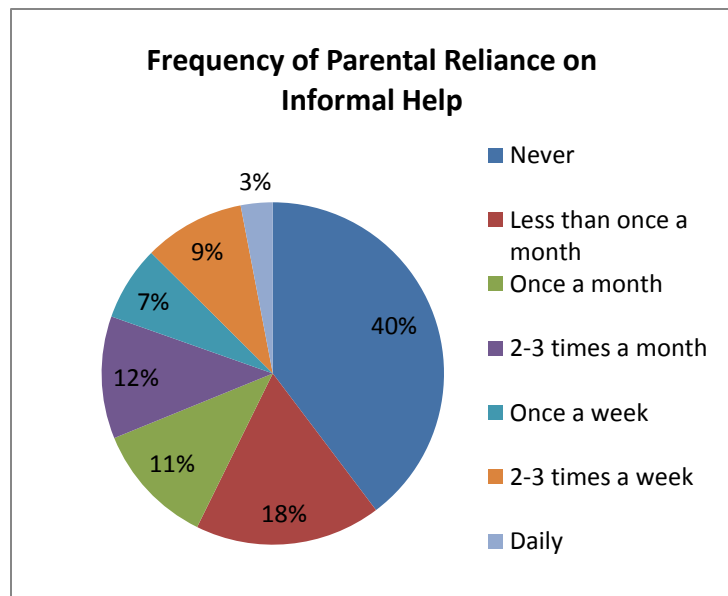


Figure 12: Frequency of Help by % of Parents in Study Sample

transportation **are about 10 times more likely to go to school events** than those parents who have no transportation assistance.

**Interestingly, the type of informal support the parent receives is connected to their aspirations for their child.** For example, while only 17% of parents obtain tutoring for their child, these parents believe their child will graduate college. And, parents who think their child will graduate college are more likely to seek out mentoring for their child. Conversely, those parents who have someone sit with their child while they are gone (28%), do not believe their student will work or live away from home.

The most disturbing finding: Parents who receive information from family and friends to support their child are **less likely to believe their child will ever live away from home.**

This study also finds that there are barriers to formal support. Survey data reveal that the involvement of government agencies has a negative predictive effect on parental expectations for their child. Regardless of the significance of the disability, with agency involvement families are less likely to think that their student could live away from home, graduate from college, or even get a job and support themselves. Additionally, interview data from state agency staff reveal that agencies tend to underestimate the person's abilities or they have limited services that don't always meet the person's needs. Consequently, both informal and formal channels of support in a system with limited options are associated with lower expectations for their child. And these lowered expectations negatively impact youth.

## **Parental/Youth Worries over Independence**

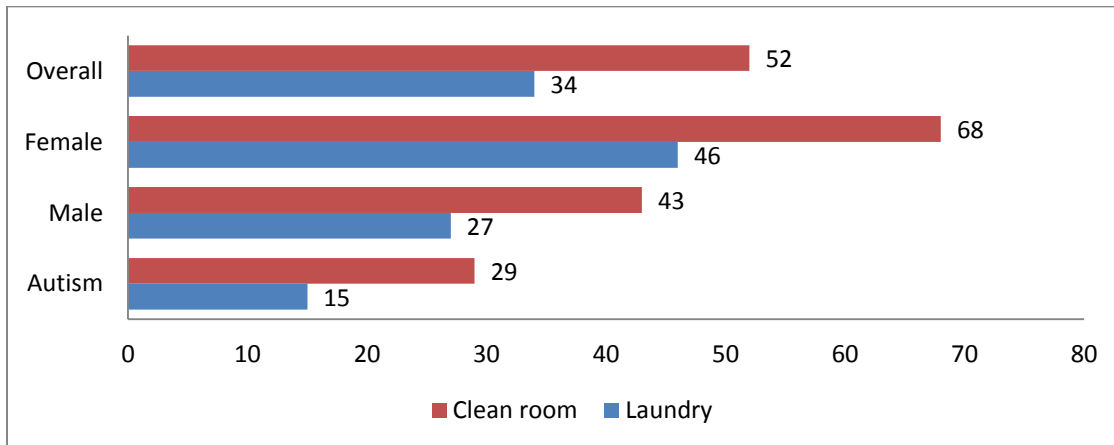
Parents want to do the right thing and don't want to over-protect or coddle their child, but they are concerned about their safety and prefer to err on the side of caution. As a result, many parents take on tasks that their child could learn to do on his/her own.

### **Some Parental Fears with Competitive, Integrated Employment**

*I think a lot of times the families are fearful of their son and daughter working out in the community, just out in public, and just basically holding down a job like everybody else does. So they are going to be exposed to a lot of people, and they feel that they are going to be more vulnerable. – State agency representative*

For example, independent living skills – doing the laundry, cleaning, washing dishes, or taking out the trash – are requisite skills to function in the “real world” and have a direct connection to post-school education, employment and success after high school. Parents help instill these skills before their children graduate from high school by giving them roles and responsibilities at home. Yet, many students with disabilities do not learn them, making it even more difficult for them to function independently. Some youth study respondents report doing chores, helping with the family business, and taking care of other family

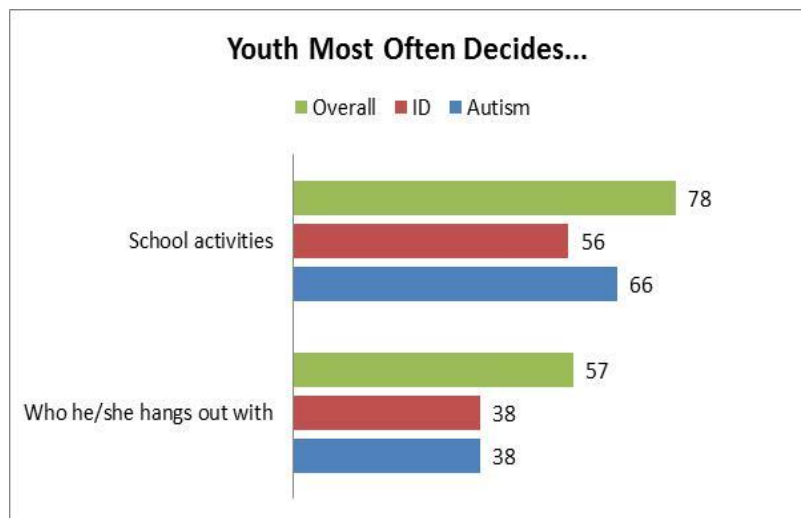
members. Fifty-seven percent of the students in the study, regardless of disability, can prepare their own breakfast and lunch. As Figure 13 illustrates, about half clean their own rooms and one in three do their own laundry, but there are gender and disability differences in these household roles. Females are more involved in household tasks than males, while few students with autism complete any household tasks other than preparing their own breakfast or lunch.



**Figure 13: Percent of Parents that Report their Students Clean Their Rooms and Do Laundry in Study Sample**

Problem-solving, budgeting and money management are also critical to independent living. Unfortunately, many students struggle with these skills. Only a few families in this study, 39%, give their children with disabilities checking accounts or debit cards, and expect them to manage their own budgets. Some parents give their children opportunities to make

decisions. For example, students with disabilities are able to decide how they spend their free time and what they wear. Parents with children with autism or intellectual disabilities, however, are more likely to make decisions for their children. Only 38% of these students decide who they hang out with, and half to two-thirds decide which school activities to join (Figure 14).



**Figure 14: Percent of Youth Who Decides More Than the Parent in Study Sample**

In addition, students surveyed have significant issues with independent living skills.

- Only 29% can go to the store and buy a few things by themselves.

- One in three cannot count change.
- Two out of three cannot get around outside of their homes on their own.
- 56% need at least a little help looking up numbers and using the telephone.

Disability experts and family members confirm that, overall, students with disabilities struggle with independent living skills; however, students who have more confidence in their ability to solve their own problems are more likely to have high aspirations. **Only 39% of students report the ability to solve problems very well.**

### Student Fears

*I'm worried about getting my own apartment, and paying bills and being on my own. To work on it is to work on your fears and just keep on going. -Student*

### Parental/Youth Expectations Collide

The lack of responsibilities, poor problem-solving skills, and little independence impacts students' thoughts about whether or not they will have enough money to live on their own, get a job, and live independently in the future, but many are still cautiously optimistic. Students worry about their futures – and what their parents think. Seventy-five percent of survey respondents had at least one worry about their future, and the worries varied significantly. Table 2 reveals their top worries.

Other Students with Disabilities	Students with ID, ED, and Autism
1. Not enough money to live on	1. Not enough money to live on
2. Won't be able to get a job	2. Won't be able to get a job
3. Living on my own	3. Being bored
4. Having no place to live	4. Parents don't agree with what I want
5. Having no transportation	5. Having no transportation

**Table 2: Top 5 Worries of Students with Intellectual (ID)/Emotional Disabilities (ED)/Autism Compared to All Other Students with Disabilities in Study Sample**

Although most of the top worries are related to not having a job, students with ID, ED, and autism have worries that other students with less significant disabilities don't worry about – such as being bored after high school and not agreeing with parents on their goals. Additional statistical testing from this research data revealed interesting potential theories about why some students worry parents won't agree with what they want. They all relate to lower parental expectations:

- Students who say that they are very likely going to live away from home are five times more likely than students who don't expect to live away from home to worry about their parents not agreeing with what they want;



- Students with autism who say that they are very likely going to live away from home are five times more likely than students who say they aren't going to live away from home to worry about their parents not agreeing;
- Female students who say they are very likely going to live away from home are twice as likely as male students to worry about their parents not agreeing;
- Students who say they are likely to graduate college are four times more likely than those who say they won't graduate college to worry about their parents not agreeing.

There is a disconnection between adults and youth that may impede the latter's 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, Figure 15 shows students are positive. But parents' expectations, when controlling by the significance of the youth's disability, are slightly lower. In fact, 37% of parents believe that their student will go to a day program after high school.

The survey finds that parents' expectations are shaped by numerous factors. Their child's independent living skills shape parental expectations of their ability to live independently, even with supports. Some of these expectations conflict with school

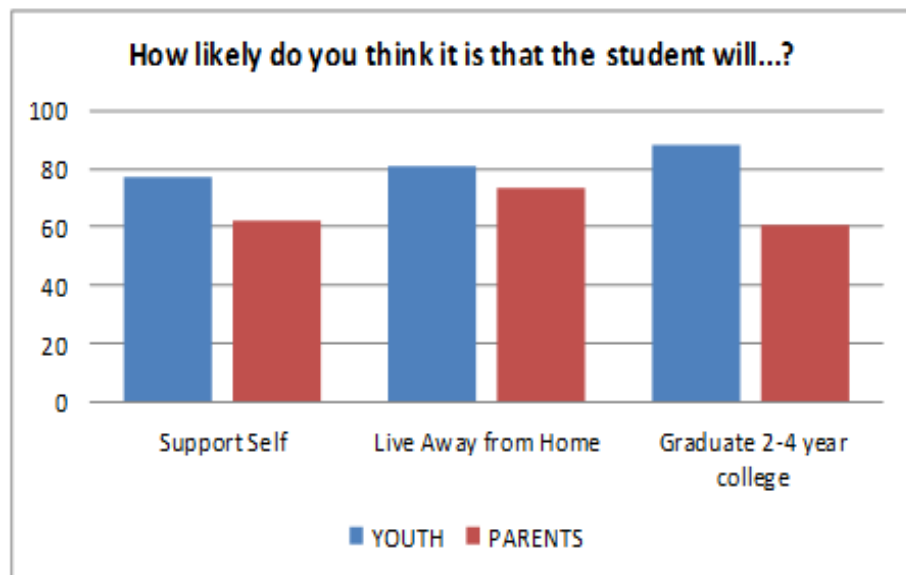


Figure 15: Future Aspirations by % of Youth and % of Parents in Study Sample

and system expectations. For example, the survey finds that parents expect youth with higher grades to graduate college; however, many youth with significant intellectual disabilities receive A's and B's in school. While necessary, grade adaptations may pose unrealistic expectations among some families over what the student can and cannot do. In addition, parents of younger students are less likely to think they can get a job; however, this perception becomes more positive if the student has paid work experience during her or his school years. Paid work experience is positively associated with families believing their child can live away from home and get a job to support themselves, but there is a differential



effect by disability. Parents of students with autism or intellectual disabilities are less likely to think that their child will get a job and support themselves than parents of children with other types of disabilities.

Survey data also finds that parents with higher incomes and more education express loftier goals for their children. They are more likely to believe that their children will graduate high school and college. On the other hand, they are less likely to be open to options outside of this path. Youth with mild to moderate disabilities recognize vocational schools as an option to reach their goals – seven in 10 say they will graduate from a trade program. However, as with other aspirations, their families’ expectations are 17 percentage points lower. Parents with a higher education are less likely to think of a vocational school as a good option for their student.

Figure 16 shows that expectations, responsibilities, and outcomes are symbiotic and mutually re-enforcing. Parents’ expectations for their child can shape opportunities for decision-making and responsibilities that can benefit their child’s transition into adulthood; these opportunities can also impact their own perceptions of their child’s future. For example, parents of students who buy things at the store and clean up their own living spaces are more likely to think these youth can live away from home; but parents of youth who make their own transportation decisions are more likely to believe they can have a paid job and support themselves, or go to college. Parents who expect their children to graduate college are less likely to have students who are suspended, and parents who expect their students to get a job and support themselves are less likely to report that their student is bullied.



Figure 16: The Expectation Cycle

### Addressing the Family Support Deficit – Information is Not Enough

This research finds that the need for parental support is clear. They all expressed a need for regular parental group discussions for emotional support and information-sharing – two important facets to parental support. And although some parents complain of not receiving any information from schools, those who do receive information struggle with determining next steps. One parent stated that she receives information from the school, but “We parents have so much with our kids to begin with. It can get very overwhelming as to what are all the options.”

In fact, this research finds that parental satisfaction with their child’s school is directly connected to whether or not they are receiving timely information about their child’s academic performance and behavior and if the school is meeting their child’s individual needs. Figure 17 shows relatively high parental satisfaction with school information received about their child’s academic performance and behavior, but when compared to parents of students in general (overall parent sample), certain disability groups did not feel as

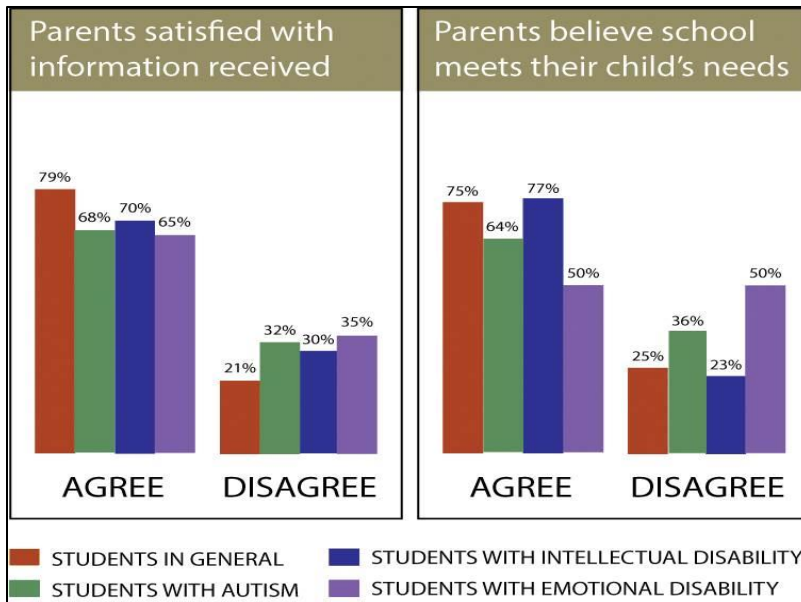


Figure 17: Parental Satisfaction with Support from School in Study Sample

positively toward the school. Parents of students with emotional disabilities and autism consistently rank their schools lower than the overall average. One-half of parents of students with emotional disabilities don’t believe their school adequately meets their child’s individual needs, indicating there is a potential teacher training issue regarding these disabilities. Some feel that they have to constantly advocate for their child’s rights and often are unsure what the next step

should be.

Thus, some parents not only want information, they want support and to be heard, but the current system limits parental expectations for their children. It is not just about information, it is about the type of information parents receive. A worldview shaped by higher aspirations promises supports based on individuality, self-determination, value, acceptance, independence, and achievement.

### Best Practices

Data show that children benefit from increased parental expectations. The more children do for themselves, the more confident they will be that they can make it – even if they need some support to do it. Some of the tasks children may be encouraged to do can strengthen the skills needed to be more successful post-high school. They include:

- ✓ Independent living skills: Students can work on preparing their own food, doing their own laundry, maintaining their hygiene, helping with household chores, using public transportation (if available and if they cannot drive) or self-directing their own means to get around, and managing a monthly allowance and banking account.

- ✓ **Problem-solving:** Students can identify strategies and resources to solve day-to-day problems. For example, at high school, students can be taught how to self-advocate, who to go to with problems, what supports they are entitled to, how to share their needs with teachers, and how to schedule and manage their time.

There are also innovative programs that encourage inclusion, self-determination, and promote independent living skills. **Project Focus** (<http://projectfocus.arizona.edu/>) at the University of Arizona in Tucson is the only program in the state offering high school students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to attend classes on a college campus and potentially work towards a degree. Students who participate not only focus on academics, but also become involved in campus life and work on independent living tasks, such as scheduling, note-taking, using public transportation, getting around campus, and solving problems. The program provides support through peer mentors, who not only help them with their homework and make sure they know how to navigate the campus, but they attend social activities with them as well. Students also have access to more employers on the University of Arizona campus than at their high schools. So, the focus of this program is not only on academics, but also on building social skills and job connections that are important for success beyond high school.

Student comments about the program may provide potential ideas for current high school transition programs on inclusion, increased opportunities for self-determination and practice on independent living skills.

- *We work on our independence and how to go to our classes on our own, and meet a lot of people.*
- *We also make our own weekly schedules. We decide what we do.*
- *It gives you a challenge...so I'm happy that I'm here, cuz I wanna own my own business. It's helping me a lot to push myself more than when I was in high school.*

Students with significant intellectual disabilities report leaving the program with jobs and increased self-confidence. They are given choices and opportunities to grow in areas they enjoy, thereby increasing their ability to get and maintain jobs.

**SARRC's Women's Empowerment series** (<http://www.autismcenter.org/>) is a 12 week program that focuses on difficulties encountered by women with autism as they learn how to transition to independent living. Topics include healthy relationships, safety, community awareness, sexuality, finances, independent living, education, career goals, and more. The series consists of a weekly group lesson with structured activities, a weekly community-based outing, two assessment sessions, and three 30 minute 1:1 sessions with a therapist. Parents also could benefit from support and information to help them maximize the

independence of their child. When there is an opportunity void, parents often step in to fill the gaps. The Parent Training and Information Center at **Raising Special Kids** (<http://www.raisingpecialkids.org/>) serves the state by providing training, support and guidance to parents and organizations, as well as opportunities to share personal experiences and the perspectives of another family who face similar issues. These parental programs increase families' ability to cope, by supporting problem solving and helping them to develop awareness of community support. Similarly, **Pilot Parents** (<http://pilotparents.org/>) provides assistance to families in Cochise, Gila, Graham, Greenlee, LaPaz, Pima, Pinal, Santa Cruz, and Yuma counties, and **MIKID** (<http://www.mikid.org/>) provides education, resources, and support to Arizona families of children with behavior health challenges across the state.

## Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy

Youth in the study are overwhelmingly hopeful about their futures, and most know what they want to do after they graduate. When a student begins high school, parents are expected to increasingly take a back seat to their child's decision-making to allow them to grow and find their own voice – and for good reason. Research finds that students with a sense of hope about their futures and self-determination/self-advocacy skills are more likely to achieve greater personal outcomes and achievement and be engaged in post-school employment and independent living.<sup>22</sup> These skills are essential to problem-solving, self-confidence, and the ability to speak up when there is a problem. Further, students who are motivated and have a specific plan say that they are being “pushed” and encouraged by someone in their life who has confidence in them. The phrase “I know you can do it” from a parent or teacher serves as a tremendous motivator in the life of a student, regardless if he or she has disabilities, and is an indicator of the types of decision-making opportunities students are afforded.

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,<sup>23</sup> 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. 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. 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.

### What Do I Want to Do with My Life?

Figure 18 highlights the overwhelmingly positive student responses regarding their likelihood of completing particular long-term goals. There were slight differences by disability group. Those with autism and intellectual disabilities report being less likely to live away from home, get a job, and arrange their own transportation. Despite these differences in outlooks, interviews reveal that students have their own ideas of what they want to do after they graduate. Some want to work with cars or go into the military. One wants to be a forensic scientist. Another wants to be an actor. Others just wanted to go to college and figure it out; however, those with intellectual disabilities rarely mention college as a choice.

Further, some of the parents of those with more significant disabilities feel their students are being “pipelined” into either janitorial or food service, which doesn’t reflect their interests. Other parents feel this is all their child can do. In fact, student aspirations are shaped by their work and volunteer experiences, their families, their friends, and what they enjoy doing.

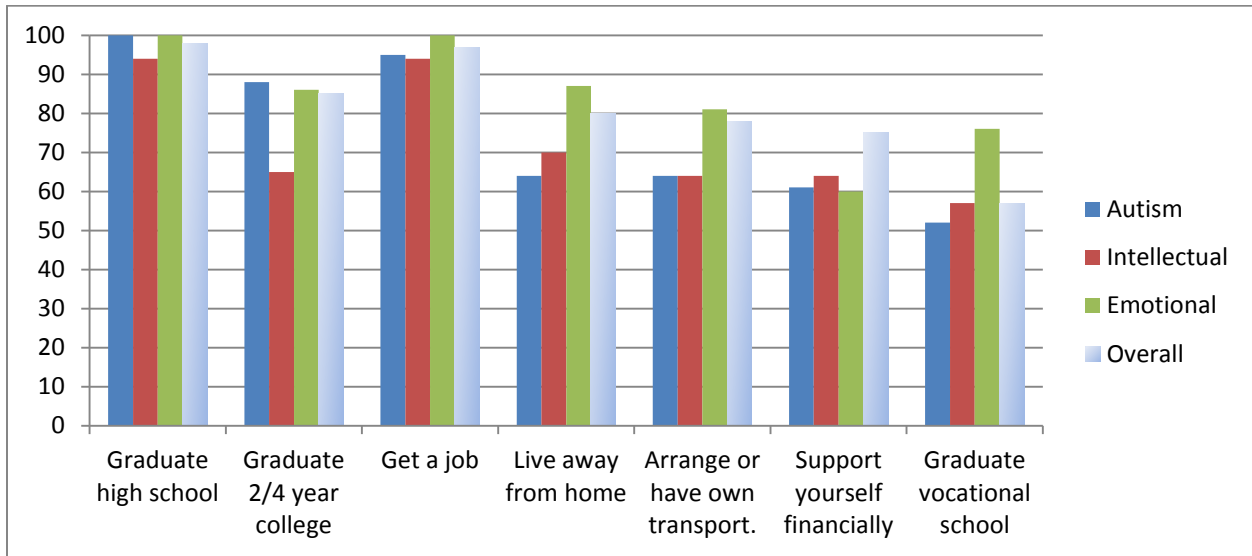


Figure 18: Youth Aspirations by % of Disability Group in Study Sample

When students were asked what they are doing to prepare for life beyond high school, the answers varied by significance of disability. Some are enrolled in CTE programs. The majority are doing something to achieve their goals, such as taking coursework in an area of interest, volunteering, working, or participating in school-based clubs, but others are having difficulty finding the path to achieve them. Further, there is a gaping hole in outcomes following graduation, and many are leaving school unprepared despite their involvement in preparation activities. Why is there such a disconnect? Much of the problem boils down to the IEP.

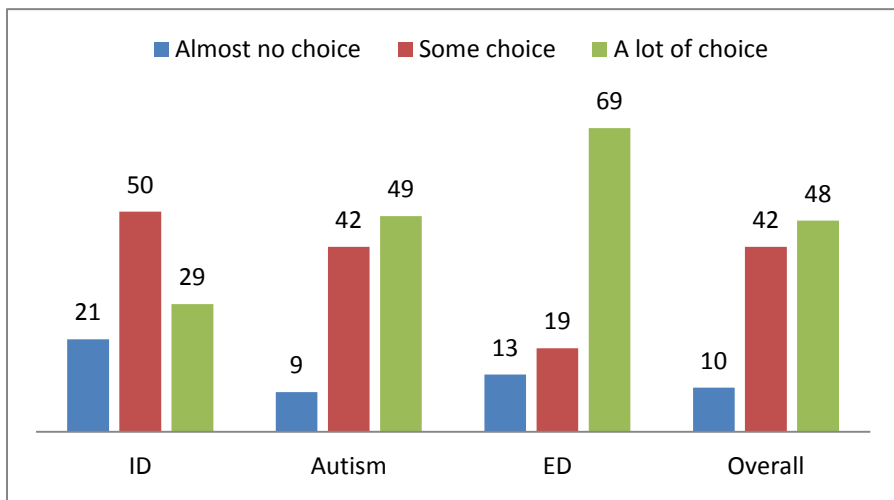
### What Is an IEP?

Under IDEA, all public school students are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE mandates that students have access to the general education curriculum and meet state grade level standards. It requires that children with disabilities receive the same support, free of charge, as is provided to students without disabilities and that this support be provided to children in general education settings as much as possible. The IEP is the mechanism that ensures FAPE. It is an annual education plan, required by IDEA, developed in concert with the student, parent, and school staff. The IEP ensures that students with disabilities have the supports needed to help them learn to the best of their abilities and that they are afforded the same opportunities as students without disabilities.

Because “appropriate” is based on each child's IEP and her or his progress, FAPE is determined on an individual basis. What is judged to be suitable for one child may not be for another. Districts are considered to be in compliance with FAPE if the child’s IEP enables the child to achieve educational progress. The law states that a school district is NOT required to provide the BEST possible educational program, only one that meets the unique needs of the child and demonstrates educational benefit. For example, individuals can receive occupational, speech, or physical therapy services, assistive technology, class schedule modifications, and/or supplemental instruction under FAPE. Not surprisingly, because some aspects of the IEP are subjective, there is, at times, contention between teachers and families over what services the student should be entitled to.

The IEP is a comprehensive assessment for each individual that connects their strengths and talents with the supports or training needed to achieve their desired goals. This is also a document that can ensure that NSTTAC predictors are incorporated in each individual’s plan. In Arizona, every student with an IEP must have a transition plan by the age of 16. The transition plan is based on a high school student's individual needs, strengths, skills, and interests. Transition planning is used to identify and develop goals which need to be accomplished during the current school year to assist the student in meeting his post-high school goals. The IEP with transition plan is the strategic framework that, when led by the student and followed by school personnel, families, and the student, can maximize the potential for each individual.

This study finds that a student’s degree of control over the IEP shows significant positive



effects in that youth’s choice of meaningful activities linked to post-school success, including choice of classes, school activities, how they get to and from school, how they spend their free time at school, and feeling listened to by adults.

**Figure 19: Choice over IEP Goals by % of Disability Group in Study Sample**

However, not all students feel they have a lot of choice over their IEPs. Figure 19 shows that there is a difference among students’ perceptions of how much choice they have in the IEP process by disability, with students with intellectual disabilities reporting the least choice.

This perception of limited choice creates barriers to self-advocacy and self-determination.

## What Students Think about the IEP

The IEP is a key document for advocacy and future planning for the student that is not often used to its maximum capacity. Many of the students in this study do not even know what an IEP is, even though they have them; however, most are self-aware and recognize that they have a disability. When teacher and student responses are compared identifying the students' disabilities, 80% of the responses matched; however, some students still can't define their disability. If they do know they have an IEP, most think it is just a piece of paper, but some value it.

### The IEP

*I can't even get started on how thankful I am for IEPs. With the accommodations, if I need extra time on my homework cuz of a doctor's appointment or just an overload, I can always ask for extra time. Pretty much all the teachers I've had that I've had to ask for extra time, are very willing to let me have that time. - Student*

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.

Overall, however, many students 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. Many students feel limited on what courses they can take for example. Figure 20 shows that students with intellectual disabilities rarely choose the classes or school activities in which to be involved. Across the board, students need to take a more active role in choosing their own classes and activities.

### On Choosing Classes

*Ever since I've been in school, I've never got to pick anything cuz I've always been stuck with things that they [teachers] said I could do. - Student*



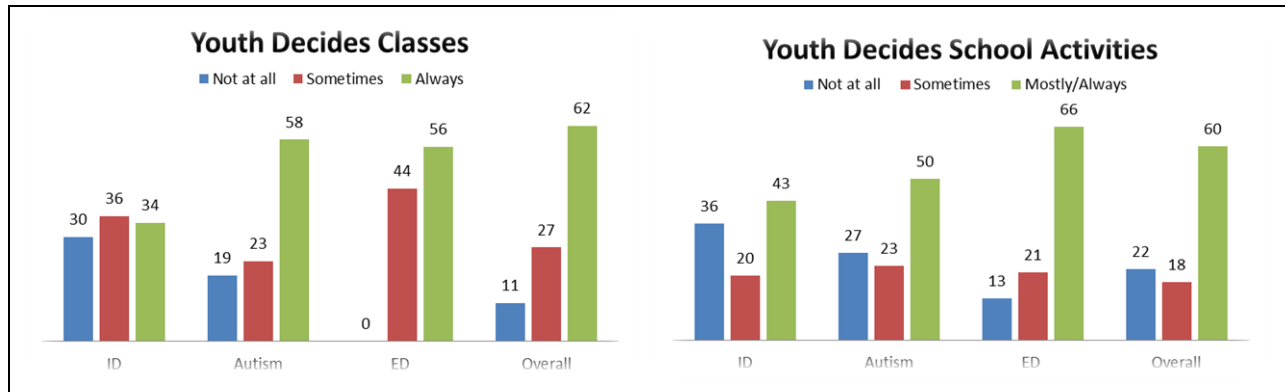


Figure 20: Youth Decisions at School by % of Disability Group in Study Sample

Further, some students and parents complain that although the supports are in writing, they may not always be followed. Many teachers not in the self-contained classrooms don't know what is in the IEP of every student, or parents and students feel that they disregard the IEP completely. This can pose serious consequences to the students' learning environment if not followed correctly.

### Consequences of an Unimplemented IEP

*According to his IEP, when he felt like he was gonna have a meltdown, he was supposed to be able to leave class and go to another teacher's class. It was a cool-off room. Well, when he tried to leave the class to go to the cool-off room, the teacher stopped him... from what he was supposed to do on his IEP. – Parent*

### Parental Involvement in the IEP and Barriers

The IEP process works for most parents, but some improvements can be made. In the parent survey, 98% of the parents attended an IEP meeting in the last year; 81% are involved in the IEP process at "the right amount;" 18% want to be more involved; and only 1% want less involvement. In essence, parents who opted to take the survey are already involved. Most of these parents feel that the IEP goals are challenging and appropriate, while about 19% of parents disagree. In short, approximately one in five families have serious questions about the process.

Teachers are required to complete the IEP paperwork annually but complain of poor attendance from some parents and other agency staff. It is important to note that many teachers value the IEP and are very involved and committed to obtaining input from students and parents, while some others see it as burdensome paperwork.

Data from this research highlight consistent barriers reported by students and parents that point to the need for a change in some school procedures and processes to improve parental and student involvement.

- *No genuine input from parents requested.* Parents want to be part of the process of

developing and planning for the IEP, but they are often informed of decisions rather than participating in the process.

- *Poor scheduling.* Sometimes, parents work, have limited transportation, and cannot attend the meetings. Some schools flex hours so that parents may attend, but flexible scheduling varies from school to school. Often, when the meetings are scheduled, some teachers don't attend. Parents want to come up with a plan for their child that draws upon a team, so when meetings are scheduled when team members cannot come, parents feel lost. Further, some are scheduled last minute and back to back with other IEPs, so there is limited time causing the families to feel rushed.
- *Lack of individualization of the IEP.* Some parents think that teachers are too busy to individualize the plan stating that the same plan is used year after year.
- *Confusing language.* Many parents and students don't understand the acronyms used, and they don't have a lot of time to get clarification. Further, if they are not English speakers, they never are able to access the IEP in Spanish to help them understand. They feel a total loss of control, and many have no idea what their rights are to advocate for themselves.
- *Parents and students unaware of rights under the IEP.* This is a consistent issue causing frustration among families and schools.

As a result of these barriers some parents walk away from the process frustrated, feeling that the teachers don't understand the needs of their child. Parents are picking their battles and what they are fighting for with some fearing retaliation from the school. They weigh the risk of bringing up certain issues and having their child labeled as "a problem child/family," and creating a disincentive for teachers to share information with the family.

### **The IEP**

*They don't go from page 1 to page 20. They just touch on, highlight what they want. Then they hand it to a parent, say, "Here." ...As a parent, I can remember going to IEPs and sitting there and saying, "Uh-huh, uh-huh." Didn't understand a word. - Parent*

## **Recommendations and Best Practices**

Parents and youth both present some practical recommendations that would make the IEP process more efficient and effective and help overcome some of the previously mentioned barriers. In addition it is recommended that students are given more opportunities to make decisions and build self-advocacy skills both at home and at school to increase their self-determination skills. Some formal programs offer assistance in these areas.

### *Improving the IEP Process*

- ✓ Give the IEP to parents ahead of time so that parents have the time to prepare and formulate their questions, maximizing the use of time for the IEP.
- ✓ Schedule the IEP meeting far enough in advance so that everyone can attend and provide some flexibility in scheduling.
- ✓ Parents can use part of the time to educate teachers about their children's disability and what's going on at home and find it is effective in building two-way communication and correcting stereotypes surrounding the disability.

### *Building Self-Determination*

- ✓ The Arizona Statewide Independent Living Council (AZSILC) and VR coordinate the **Arizona Youth Leadership Forum (YLF)**. YLF is an innovative, intensive five-day training program for high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors who have disabilities. The program includes structured small and large group activities, field trips, a dance, a formal banquet, and a tour of the state capitol. It provides educational programs on topics such as: positive self-concept, options after high school, the history of disability as a culture, and leadership responsibilities. Staff and presenters who engage with the student delegates include disability community leaders, legislators, and numerous role models who have disabilities. Student delegates are assisted in developing a Personal Leadership Plan which includes specific action items that they complete when they return to their communities. Following completion of YLF, student delegates serve as a youth voice to inform the Arizona State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL), and are assigned a mentor for on-going support for one year.

Pre- and post-tests reveal that most who began YLF were not previously aware of services or how they could access post-secondary education. But after involvement with the program, participants knew about assistive technology and independent living, laws that affect them, and their IEPs and how they work. All of the participants felt more confident and informed after completing the program. Many had significant disabilities.

- ✓ Parents and students with intellectual disabilities are often told college is not an option; however, attending college can teach students with intellectual disabilities invaluable skills to help them be independent, give them access to social and cultural opportunities on college campuses, and build their self-determination and self-advocacy skills to help them be more job ready –none of which requires completing a degree. However, those who are pursuing a degree are more likely to achieve it with supports in place. While disability support programs on college

campuses are helpful, many focus on academics and accommodations. They don't pair the student with a mentor to help them with independent living skills to ensure that they are successful in college and beyond. This includes help with scheduling classes, time management, self-advocacy, and coordinating social activities.

**Think College** (<http://www.thinkcollege.net/>) is a national organization dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving inclusive higher education options for people with intellectual disability. With a commitment to equity and excellence, Think College supports evidence-based and student centered research and practice by generating and sharing knowledge, guiding institutional change, informing public policy, and engaging with students, professionals and families. The site includes state resources and information and advice to help students be successful in college.

In this state there are only two integrated college programs that specifically target students with disabilities and go beyond academics to ensure success in life, which have been discussed in previous sections. **Project Focus** gives access to college classes and campus life for high school students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in the Tucson Unified School District. This gives them job opportunities and raises their expectations about what they could do with increased opportunities for decision-making. Likewise, **Chapel Haven**, also located in Tucson, offers a residential option for high school graduates with less significant disabilities. They offer job coaching and academic and life skills support for those who attend college at University of Arizona or other community college but need a mentor. Although there are significant benefits to this program, it is private pay and can be cost-prohibitive to many.

**Northbridge College Success Program** (formerly known as Bridgeway), located in Scottsdale, is also a private pay program offering students with all types of disabilities the opportunity to attend college with needed supports. Blending together individualized academic advisement, personalized scheduled weekly tutoring sessions, topic-focused success workshops; access to assistive technology and a schedule of social events, Northbridge students receive both the academic and social support needed to complete their academic programs.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

We have seen how NSTTAC predictors that help students succeed post-school play out in Arizona homes and schools. While Arizona is improving in some areas, and there are pockets of innovation throughout the state, every area needs improvement - one of these is in education financing. Inadequate funding leads to a shortage of and a turnover of qualified special education and general education teachers, a lack of training for current teachers, and barriers to acquiring the equipment and supports needed for students to progress in their education goals. These effects resonate among all of the schools included in this study. In light of these circumstances, the input of youth, family, and stakeholders is especially compelling and helpful in moving the process forward.

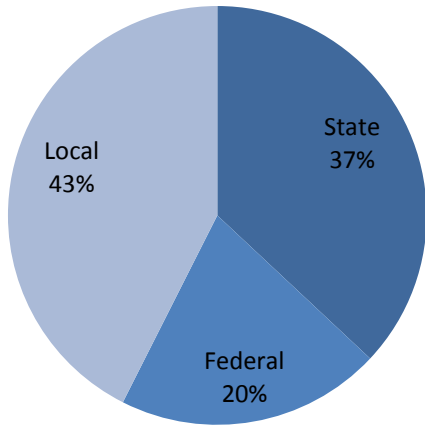
Throughout the research we see that despite this austere economic environment, youth remain generally optimistic about their futures, an attitude that is related to inclusive opportunities where youth can exhibit increased self-determination. However, the responses from schools and families are inconsistent. Some schools, including those that do not receive federal VR TSW funds, are reaching outside the school to build community connections and exposing youth to goal-connected academics and real work experiences. But many schools are struggling to find meaningful academic experiences and work for their students, as some teachers and businesses decline students opportunities based on their limited knowledge of disability. Some families are bending over backwards to provide their youth with social, work, and leadership opportunities both in school and in the community. Others take a more limited approach, are uninvolved, and/or are simply unaware of their basic rights in the IEP process. In many of these instances, parents feel the burden is on them to advocate.

To address the concerns revealed in this transition study, we make several systemic recommendations to facilitate stronger and more consistent transition planning and outcomes for Arizonan adolescents with disabilities. Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of transition, our recommendations center around four options for both policy and practice changes: 1) Funding, 2) Leadership, 3) Transition Planning, and 4) Social Capital.

### **Old News: Still Little Funding.**

Arizona is among the lowest-spending states in dollars allocated per student. In 2011, it ranked **47<sup>th</sup>** for total education spending.<sup>24</sup> This has a disproportionately adverse impact on students with disabilities. Since 1975, it was estimated that educating children with disabilities cost approximately twice as much as educating children without disabilities. To support state and local governments, Congress set the maximum federal contribution at 40% of the excess costs of educating students with disabilities through IDEA. However, the

federal contribution maximum has not been adjusted for inflation and continues to fund only 20% of Arizona special education – shifting responsibility for the remaining costs onto local and state governments (figure 21).<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 21: Arizona Special Education Spending by Government Source, 2012-2013**

Minimal federal funding of IDEA has exacerbated the state’s already critical education financing and teacher shortage problem — fueling the extensive use of substitutes, particularly in special education. The U.S. Department of Education has identified a special education teacher shortage in Arizona at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels.<sup>26</sup> This contributes to the poor student-teacher ratio experienced in the state’s schools.

In the 2012-2013 school year, there was a \$19 million shortfall in special education spending. This was exacerbated by the federal sequestration in the current 2013-2014 school year that cut over \$10 million in federal IDEA funds for Arizona.

Federal IDEA funds were restored in fiscal year 2014-2015. Prior levels have been inadequate to obtain the resources and expertise necessary to teach and support the state’s growing number of special education students and to build community-based transition programs.

It is critical that special education funding is increased, reducing the demand for ESAs, and keeping students and their associated funding within the local schools and communities where long-term inclusive community opportunities and solutions are more likely to occur. Most states are experiencing similar issues and, without a change in the federal allotment for IDEA funding, ADE and school districts will continue to experience financial strains and depleted services. In addition, increasing funding for employment programs can alleviate some of the stress placed on an overwhelmed system

In response to the demand for qualified, trained special education teachers, Arizona’s higher education institutions have a significant role in recruiting and training pre-service and in-service teachers (i.e., future teachers and practicing teachers) and education administrators. Currently, teachers spend only one to two weeks learning about the transition process and writing a transition plan. Additional training can provide teachers with a stronger knowledge of the transition process. Some of the actions that can increase qualified teachers include:

- Provide coursework and certifications in evidence-based secondary education, and transition services and planning so that the current supply and next generation of teachers understand the importance of transition planning and how to do it successfully;
- Participate in personnel-preparation grants offered by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs that address teacher- and administrator-shortages in special education;
- Collaborate with ADE and school districts in a public information campaign about loan-forgiveness and scholarship programs for pre-service and in-service teacher-candidates offered by the U.S. Department of Education to address teacher-shortages across the nation.<sup>27</sup>

### Leadership that Values Transition Planning Is Critical.

This study finds that there is a set of variables that education administrators control (shown in Figure 22) that show significant positive effects on youth self-efficacy, regardless of the students’ disability significance, race/ethnicity, or school location. However, the presence of

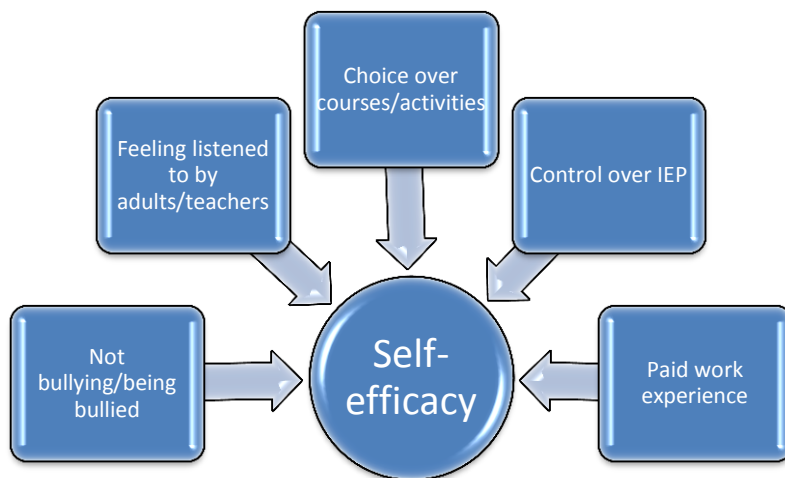


Figure 22: School Indicators of High Aspirations among Study Participants

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 and staff. Their collective goal is to build academic, vocational education, and employment opportunities among all students.



In addition, funding levels for transition programs vary by district. With leading schools viewing the community as the final destination for their students, funding and priorities can be focused on community or school-based options that work with the community for all students with disabilities. The general education classrooms and activities are accessed more often than self-contained classrooms in these schools, and students have the opportunity to make real choices about their futures. Students enjoy their experiences and are more optimistic about their futures with this access to more ideas, opportunities, and experiences.

To foster these supportive school-wide cultures, ADE/ESS and the University of Kansas developed the **Secondary Transition Mentoring Project (STMP)/College & Career Readiness Team Training (CCRTT)** (<http://www.azed.gov/special-education/special-projects/secondary-transition/stmp-ccrtt/>) to help eligible schools provide all students with the competencies they need to become career-equipped, socially and emotionally engaged, and life-long learners. STMP/CCRTT is a three-year program that provides intervention, intensive training, and mentoring across schools to create cultures that promote college and career readiness among all students. Started in 2012, the program already has 40 schools participating and three schools on the waiting list. There are even waiting lists for ADE's annual state conferences. This shows that, even in the face of so many obstacles, schools still want to improve and are searching for information to do so. But they cannot do it alone; like parents and students, they need help.

Staff turnover is a significant problem that stymies best practices at all levels of the transition process. For example, while ADE staff stated that they would like to train district administrators and faculty on best practices and build capacity of schools, most schools are only requesting training on basic transition requirements for their new hires. Likewise, high staff turnover in Arizona agencies serving individuals with disabilities mirrors national patterns for case workers, direct service providers (DSPs) and frontline supervisors.<sup>28</sup> Other research has linked this to lower wages (many DSPs have a salary below the poverty level) and a lack of fringe benefits (e.g., lack of or unaffordable health insurance).

This turnover limits staffs' ability to foster relationships with students and to fully understand their abilities. These agencies are also unable to build community connections to facilitate inclusive employment, housing, and independent living services. Further, the ability to cultivate relationships with families becomes compromised, creating a barrier for families and other agencies to access needed resources and information. Finally, the turnover of business managers and HR staff creates barriers to employment opportunities as well. Relationships, community partnerships, and interagency agreements are in constant flux as staff come and go.

In this context the need for high-quality and accessible training is even more relevant to



improving services among all agencies for transition-age adolescents with disabilities. Online training and support through webinars and online coaching can facilitate training for all stakeholders, including agency staff, support staff, and parents, in which transportation and location poses a barrier. Virtual training and support has been used in other fields with substantial benefits, such as tele-health and education.<sup>29</sup>

Further, state level policies can empower and support school and agency staff to address issues due to staff turnover. These strategies can facilitate sustained staffing, and ensure systematic implementation of transition services. They could potentially include:

- Limiting client caseloads and classroom sizes;
- Promoting school-community partnerships through community-based instruction or business hiring incentives;
- And partnering with ADE and Arizona’s public higher education institutions to offer consistent continuing education.

Agency and community support is important to meeting post-school outcomes. Strong leadership within provider and government agencies and businesses can trickle down to their staff and create a culture in which people with disabilities are valued and expected to hold a competitive job in the community. This belief system guides post-school placements beyond day program placements to meaningful employment, and can mitigate barriers due to staff turnover.

### **Arizona’s Semi-Permanent System Gaps: Be Prepared and Know What Lies Ahead.**

To better understand how to support teachers, students, and parents, we need to understand the current limited systemic options facing current high school graduates with disabilities. We must also start early in preparing students and families for life beyond high school – beginning as early as elementary school. In Arizona, the minimum age a transition plan must be written in the IEP is 16; consequently, this is also the minimum recommendation set by the IDEA. Students, parents, and agency and school staff have indicated this is too late, and that transition planning should begin sooner. Transition planning begins at 14 in states such as Illinois, Maryland, and Tennessee. Arizona can follow these states’ lead by lowering the age for mandatory transition planning. For a sample timeline of when transition activities should occur, see Appendix D.

In a student’s senior year, teachers and counselors deliberate over what options are truly available for some students who need support. For example, Figure 23 shows the limited options available through DDD. DDD day program and center-based employment placements (e.g., segregated employment settings) are decreasing, while group-supported

employment (GSE - e.g., groups of individuals with disabilities who work in the community, often at less than minimum wage) is on the rise. Individual supported employment (ISE, e.g., individual supports to hold a job in the community that pays competitive wages), however, remains under-utilized.

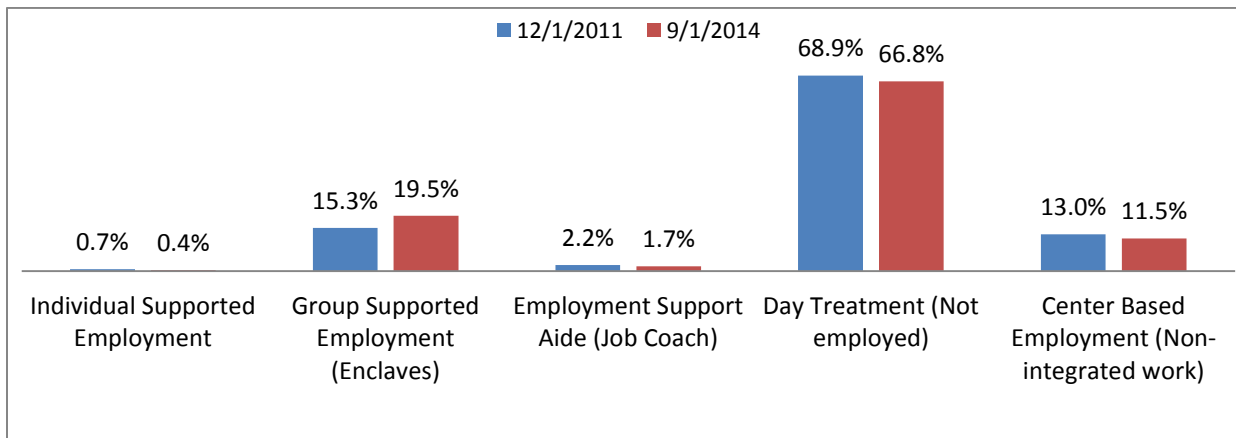


Figure 23: % of DDD Participants in Day Program/Employment by Setting, 12/2011 - 9/2014

Group supported employment (GSE) alongside others with disabilities is the most common employment service provided by DDD. With GSE services, they have continuous supervision. The downfall of GSE is that it often pays less than minimum wage, the work is separated from workers without disabilities, and is not necessarily targeted to individual interests.

Nevertheless, if graduating high school students are eligible for the Arizona Long Term Care System (ALTCS), they jump right into GSE. However, if they prefer competitive employment, they have to apply through VR, which maintains a long waiting list; if they do not have what is considered to be the “most significant disability,” the wait is indefinite. The process becomes subjective as to whether a disability is considered “most significant” or only “significant,” and poses a barrier for thousands of individuals who could benefit from minor support to get jobs. Those considered the most difficult to employ are the only ones who VR can serve under the current order of selection – one of the reasons the rehabilitation rate is a dismal 49%.

While some providers offer ISE, they are often fee-based or serve individuals with only minor intellectual disabilities. Many providers do not provide ISE through DDD because they say, “the reimbursement rates through DDD are too low” or “there are just not enough referrals from DDD.” In effect, families with access to resources or that have students with less significant disabilities have more options – although those are limited as well. In essence, when some get ready to graduate, there is nothing in place for them. Many are shuffled into day training because there are no other options. Once they are in day programs, it is difficult to redirect them, and represents a waste of potential. The youth in Figure 24 illustrates the obstacles students with disabilities encounter when thinking about their futures.



**Figure 24: Options for Youth with Disabilities upon Graduation**

While some of the solutions are self-evident – *fund VR so that all consumers may be served; change DDD reimbursement rates and strategy for ISE to increase qualified integrated employment vendors; make interagency collaborations an expectation by each agency's leadership* – the system itself suffers from overall low expectations for youth with disabilities. Historically, not enough resources have been allocated to employment, training, housing – even education – for youth with disabilities, yet there has been an emphasis on day programs and family support to help families care for youth with disabilities who are not expected to participate fully in the community.

We know that 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 (such as Project Focus at the University of Arizona), and increasing capacity and technical support for all stakeholders via certifications, programs, and technical assistance.

There is a plethora of federal initiatives to reverse this trend, but this study finds that the state's infrastructure is not as well configured as it could be to adequately prepare youth with disabilities or be able to address these initiatives on its own. In Arizona, expectations are that the private sector, providers, and family members should step up to care for and address the needs of the majority of youth with disabilities. The preparation and training of the next generation of young adults with disabilities is left largely to families and the greater community, but expectations about who is supposed to do what become muddled with so

many entities involved in the child's life. In the midst of these complex and fragmented systems, families, individuals, and the overall community struggle to support youth with disabilities so they are not left behind and segregated by our formal support systems.

### **Look beyond the Disability Label in Transition Planning.**

The refrain is a familiar one: "The disability doesn't define the person." And in this study, we find this to be true. Some students are misdiagnosed. Many have multiple disabilities that were not identified on their IEPs, or had disabilities that were questioned by their parents. Those with defined disabilities did not always fit the label. For instance, some students with a diagnosis of autism are chatty and social. In this research we looked at differences in survey responses by disability group, e.g. autism, intellectual disability, and emotional disability among others. Predictably, we find a difference in aspirations, expectations, inclusion in school life, and feeling of control among the three groups and when compared against the overall population of students with primarily learning disabilities.

Society often expects less from populations with significant disabilities because of their label and the presumed weaknesses associated with these labels. This is a deficits-based model of disability where the focus is on what the student cannot do. In this way, students with intellectual disabilities who are still capable of learning may focus on work preparation activities over improving their reading skills, or are not required to take on as many responsibilities at home. They are assumed to be unable to perform, when they indeed can; they just may require more training or time to do so.

These beliefs challenge the notion of person-centered planning and self-determination, which are critical to successful post-school outcomes. The disability field is moving to a supports-based model of disability where an examination of the person's skills and the environment facilitates an understanding of what supports need to be in place so the person can be successful. This is facilitated through person-centered planning and opportunities for self-determination.

A person centered plan targets the individual's vision for his or her future and determines ways to get there. It can help those involved with the student with a disability see the total person, recognize her or his desires and interests, and discover completely new ways of thinking about the future. The informal person-centered team meets to identify opportunities for the individual to also develop personal relationships, participate in their community, increase control over their own lives, and develop the skills and abilities needed to achieve their goals. These plans help inform IEPs and the transition plan by providing background about the person and his or her goals. Research on outcomes of person-centered planning has shown an improvement in social networks, closer contact with family and friends, and greater involvement and engagement in group activities. In essence, it leads to greater

inclusion, quality of life, and builds the individual's social supports needed to help reach goals.

The Education Career and Action Plan (ECAP) is a person-centered planning tool that has been mandated in Arizona public high schools for 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> graders since 2008; however, few persons encountered in this study were aware of the ECAP. The ECAP is both a documented plan and a process that students use, with support from school counselors, teachers and parents, to clarify their career goals and to refine their postsecondary plans. It helps guide their decisions about the courses and activities they choose throughout high school. ECAP gives students “a voice and a choice” in personalizing education around their interests, their skills, and their aspirations, so that they can maximize the opportunities available to them after graduation. The process enhances a student's understanding of the relevance of school courses and out-of-school learning opportunities connected to their future plans. Table 3 shows the basic content of the ECAP that is required to be reviewed for each student annually. Using this plan with students with disabilities would highlight areas often neglected in IEPs, ensuring that every student has a comprehensive career plan centered around their own desires and interests.

Additionally, district-wide and school-wide policies can promote student self-efficacy. Instituting school-wide PBIS policy promotes positive behavior, reduces bullying, and emphasizes inclusive environments among the students. In instances where bullying does occur, schools and districts can institute policies that promote conflict resolution rather than punishment so that problems can be solved in an open and constructive way.

At a state-level Arizona is involved in several initiatives to challenge the disability label, giving everyone the opportunity to pursue competitive employment.

- An Employment First state prioritizes employment as the first option when designing policies, programs, and investments to support people with disabilities. Most of these states invest in supported employment to help people with disabilities obtain competitive employment. Employment First initiatives have spread across 44 states – 32 of which have it codified in policy and legislation. With these values codified into state policies, Washington has reported an 87% employment rate for individuals with IDD. Other states reporting that 50% or more with IDD obtained competitive employment were Oklahoma and Connecticut. The hope is that the initiatives under Employment First in Arizona will lead to these same positive outcomes.

<b>ACADEMIC</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Plan coursework to explore interests and develop skills
<input type="checkbox"/> Meet all high school graduation requirements
<input type="checkbox"/> Review progress at least once a grading period
<input type="checkbox"/> Track needed interventions, advisements and supports
<input type="checkbox"/> Record academic achievements or awards
<input type="checkbox"/> Document postsecondary education goals
<input type="checkbox"/> Participate in fine arts programs, dual credit courses, honors placements
<b>CAREER</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify career options based on interests, values, and skills
<input type="checkbox"/> Explore career opportunities through research and out of school opportunities
<input type="checkbox"/> Document a career goal and needed educational requirements
<input type="checkbox"/> Participate in career and technical education courses
<input type="checkbox"/> Understand the Arizona Workforce projections
<input type="checkbox"/> Participate in work experiences, internships, job shadowing
<b>POSTSECONDARY</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Explore admissions requirements for technical schools, community colleges, universities, including any college readiness tests such as ACT, SAT
<input type="checkbox"/> Compare postsecondary institution offerings
<input type="checkbox"/> Complete and submit necessary applications
<input type="checkbox"/> Create a financial assistance plan
<input type="checkbox"/> Complete a personal resume for college & employment
<b>EXTRACURRICULAR— Document in:</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Clubs, organizations or CTSO
<input type="checkbox"/> Athletics /Recreational activities
<input type="checkbox"/> Fine arts opportunities
<input type="checkbox"/> Civic and community service or volunteer activities
<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership opportunities
<input type="checkbox"/> Other activities the student might wish to note

Table 3: ECAP Basic Requirements

- Diversified workplaces tend to provide increased benefits to employees, customers served and business outcomes. An employer engagement collaborative, **Untapped Arizona**, was created to support the business community in meeting their workforce needs by including individuals with disabilities in their hiring practices. Untapped Arizona seeks to match employers who utilize hiring practices focusing on diversity with employers seeking to develop or expand their workforce diversity. This mentoring process is expected to overcome obstacles that restrict opportunity for both employers and potential employees to benefit from their mutual differences, shared competencies and expectations for success. It uses a network of partners



who can provide technical assistance and support to employers pertaining to hiring, legal issues, reasonable accommodations and employee retention.

### **Build Social Capital.**

As the formal system places more and more responsibilities on families to know about and understand the resources to prepare their children for the future, the role of informal support becomes crucial to successful transition planning. Many families desire emotional support from other families of children with disabilities – and they should have access to it. Every school could give parents the space and assistance to organize and support one another. Although privacy policies may prevent schools from sharing contact information between parents who are receiving special education services, they can bring parents together in other ways, i.e., through parent-training or parent school advisory committees.

In addition, parents want information on their rights, services, and what their options are for their children beyond high school, but they must be careful where they get this information. This study finds that help from the formal system lowers the aspirations of both youth and their parents regardless of the significance of a disability. Information from other parents tends to lower aspirations as well. Thus, if parents receive information only from other parents who are using formal agency resources with their limited programs, rules, and expectations, it is no surprise that their expectations for their own child are reduced.

Therefore, it is important that parents have access to support and information outside of the disability bubble as well. Providing parents and adolescents with inclusive social interaction opportunities with peers and families without disabilities – such as extra-curricular activities, school-wide initiative communities, and incentives for businesses to connect with the disability community – can create new connections. These connections can provide unique information, a form of bridging social capital. These connections typically involve a heterogeneous group of people encountered at work, in the community, and through other friends. Since the information provided by these members is not disability-focused, it often leads to greater access and more diversity to options in education, social activities, and employment, and can spur greater physical and mental health outcomes and well-being.

Supporting previous research, this study finds that the use of informal supports – friends, family, neighbors – 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 community-based work programs tend to personally know someone with a disability.



Figure 25 illustrates the impact of social capital and a network of people who support student aspirations, which should be a part of every transition plan. 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. 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.

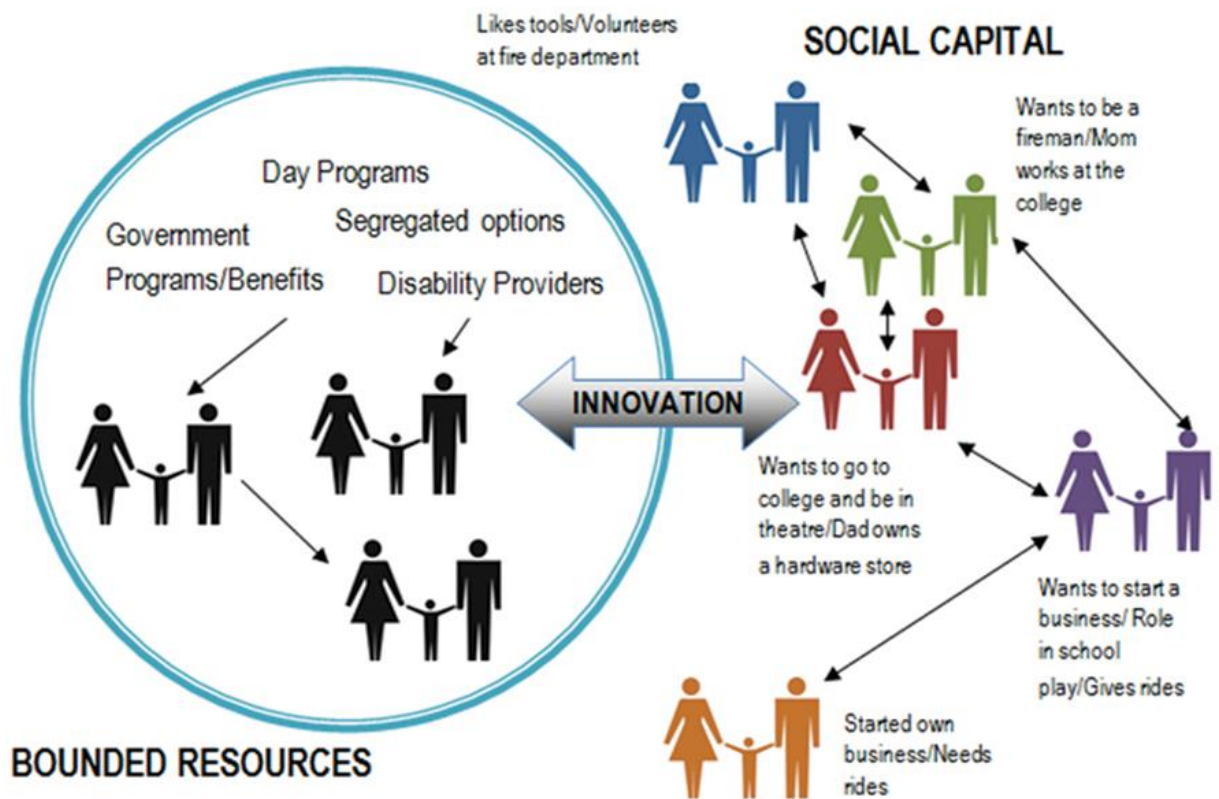


Figure 25: The Impact of Social Capital on Youth Employment Options

These activities cannot be sustained without the technological knowledge and usage of mobile internet-based technologies, especially among youth and families with transportation barriers. Among youth, technology is used to access information, build social supports, prevent bullying, engage in social activities, self-advocate, and to lead more independent lives. Professionals also use it for technical assistance and professional development. Since the use of technology has become so integral to managing daily activities for all people and

to building social capital, it is critical to provide opportunities and technical assistance for access to such technologies for adolescents with disabilities in Arizona.<sup>30</sup>

While respondents in our study say they use technology, we find that students with the most significant disabilities continue to experience technology isolation, and that this is significantly related to aspirations and expectations. Arizona policymakers and agencies can take the lead in improving this outcome by endorsing, along with the state of Colorado and many national and state agencies and organizations, the declaration entitled “The Rights of People with Cognitive Disabilities to Technology and Information Access.”<sup>31</sup> Embedded in the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Developmental Disabilities Act, IDEA, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the declaration provides an avenue for creating accessible technology and training for people with disabilities. This could translate into accessible public transportation applications, accessible city and business websites, increased use of technology to support independent-living, and online transition plans that are accessible and easily monitored and modified by self-advocates and those that support them.

In addition, foundations, corporations, and government agencies can leverage their support within a fragmented and very limited formal system to help these informal communities thrive and support youth with disabilities who are transitioning out of high school. Most schools do not elicit grants from foundations, businesses, and government agencies. Innovative partnerships between districts, schools, businesses, and local agencies that produce meaningful programming and publicity campaigns can be an opportunity to elicit grant funds. These funds can be used to train staff, build relationships with community businesses, and create real opportunities to meet long-term postsecondary transition goals.

### **Conclusion: Formal and Informal Systems Working Together.**

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. Properly preparing our youth for life beyond high school is everyone’s responsibility.

## APPENDIX A: METHODS

This study utilizes data from multiple methods - parent and youth surveys, guardian and youth focus groups, individual and guardian interviews, and key informant interviews - to triangulate findings and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Additionally, cross checking was used throughout the study employing different methods. For example, as issues were introduced in youth and guardian surveys and key informant interviews, the presence of these issues were either corroborated or refuted in the youth and guardian focus groups and interviews. Following is additional information about each method employed.

### Surveys

Surveys were administered to youth in public high school with IEPs<sup>32</sup> and guardians of public high school students with IEPs to collect as much data as possible. We collected data about how high school students with disabilities and their parents prepare and view students' employment or educational goals beyond high school. The youth survey consisted of

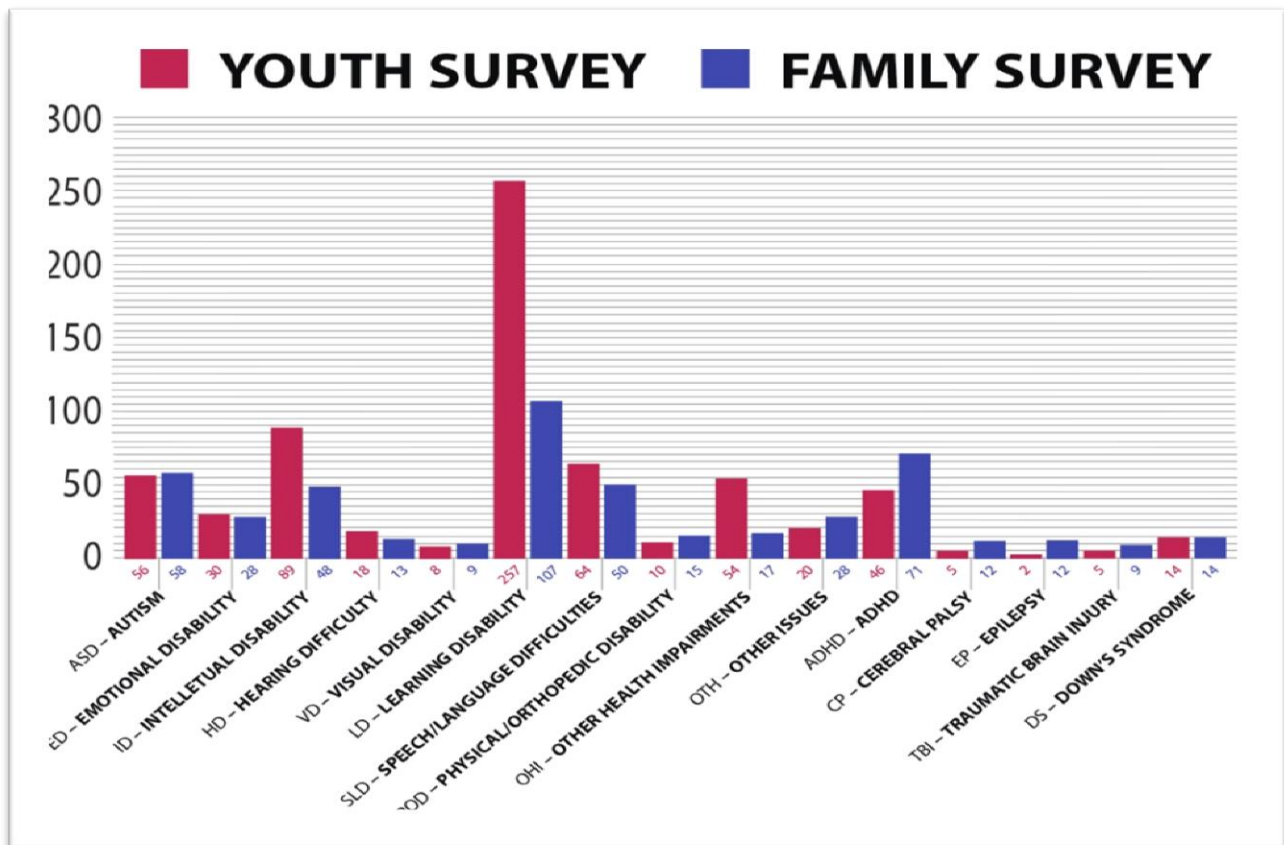


Figure 26: Disability Demographics of Youth in Youth and Parent Surveys

questions covering a broad range of areas including social involvement, aspirations, the IEP, preparation for the future, employment, school experience, and demographic information

with disability type. The family survey covered similar topics, and included questions about parents' school involvement and support for their children's future. Not all of the families were related to the youth who were surveyed, since the surveys links were distributed separately. However, it was useful to compare their answers and assured reliability of the responses. There were 639 high school students with disabilities and 224 guardians representing 17 school districts in Arizona who completed the survey - totaling 863 participants.

Participant Demographics	Youth Survey		Family Survey	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age</b>				
14	47	7.4	20	9
15	89	14	37	16.5
16	118	18.5	47	21
17	127	20	57	25.5
18	137	21.5	24	10.75
19	59	9.25	5	2.25
20	14	2.25	8	3.5
21	9	1.5	8	3.5
Don't Know	5	.6	0	0
Missing	31	5	18	8
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	353	55.5	136	60.75
Female	248	39	80	35.75
Missing	35	5.5	8	3.5
<b>Race</b>				
African American	52	8.25	12	5.4
American Indian/Native American	32	5	6	2.7
Asian	10	1.5	4	1.8
Caucasian/Non-Hispanic	222	35	148	66
Hispanic	144	22.5	24	10.7
Multi-racial	44	7	19	8.5
Other	16	2.5	2	.9
Missing	116	18.25	9	4
<b>Locality</b>				
City	183	28.75	58	26.5
Suburb	235	37	153	68
Town	119	18.75	7	3
Rural	99	15.5	6	2.5
<b>Grade</b>				
9th	118	18.6	44	19.7
10th	103	16	50	22.3
11th	133	21	49	21.8
12th	197	31	40	17.8
Missing	85	13.4	41	18.4

**Table 4: Youth and Parent Survey Demographics**

disabilities and families to test for reliability to determine whether survey components needed to be re-conceptualized.

To recruit participants who are high school students, mostly minors, we could not use the random sampling strategy. Instead, we collected stratified random samples of unified and

Figure 26 and Table 4 show basic demographics for survey respondents. The disabilities reported should be taken with caution. Some teachers only identified students by primary disability so others may not be reported. In addition, some students filled out the teacher sections and self-identified either as not having a disability, not knowing, or skipping the screen altogether. Understanding this could be a problem, we included a proxy question asking about their ability to handle tasks like counting change. This served as a proxy for intellectual disabilities for those who didn't self-report. Also, the number of responses and the multiple methods employed ensured responses were credible. We piloted the youth and family surveys with a non-random sample of students with significant

high school districts in Arizona, and included those schools/districts that elected to participate. We required guardian consent for those under 18 or for those 18 and over who had not assumed their rights. To collect information from students, we used two survey instruments (as determined by school and student): (i) mass mailing survey distributed by school districts; (ii) online and paper surveys completed at schools with assistance of ASU staff. Youth were recruited if they could understand questions. Simple language and Spanish language surveys were also available. ASU staff also provided one-to-one assistance when needed.

For the guardian survey, participating districts invited guardians to participate in the online survey. In addition, government agencies and nonprofit organizations referred survey participants to the online survey, and it was also posted on ASU's Morrison Institute website and its social media profile. Both youth and guardian survey participants could elect to be in a drawing for one of twelve \$50 gift cards and two iPad4s after completing surveys. The survey administration was from April – October 2014.

Data collected through Qualtrics was analyzed using factor analysis and ordinary least squares (OLS) linear and logistic regression models using STATA12, a statistical software package. STATA12, was used to calculate frequency counts. It was also used to perform OLS linear multiple regressions to test causality and relationships between survey topics and questions. We also created a comprehensive measure that identified the variables that contributed to positive school environments and higher aspirations among the students. Reliability of the combined values for the best practice is verified with Cronbach's alpha values and is discussed in the "Where Do We Go from Here?" section of this report.

## **Focus Group/Interviews**

Focus groups were chosen to provide individuals an opportunity to be actively involved and invested in the research, as well as to give participants and family members the opportunity to network and offer peer support to each other. This method also advanced shared perspectives and identified points of consensus among the participants. We conducted eight focus groups with high school youth with disabilities who had individualized education plans (IEPs), two focus groups with middle school youth with disabilities transitioning into high school, and nine interviews<sup>33</sup> with high school youth and their parents who were not comfortable in focus group settings. We reached a total of 56 youth with developmental disabilities (DD) and 25 of their guardians.



Focus Group: 56 students		
	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	37	66
Female	19	34
<b>Race</b>		
African American	5	9
Caucasian/Non-Hispanic	25	45
Hispanic	25	45
Multi-racial	1	1
<b>Locality</b>		
City	15	27
Suburb	21	38
Town	0	0
Rural	20	35
<b>Grade</b>		
9th	20	36
10th	4	7
11th	9	16
12th	23	41
<b>Locality</b>		
Intellectual	25	45
Traumatic Brain Injury	2	4
Autism	8	14
Learning	1	1
Emotional	20	36

**Table 5: Focus Group/Interview Demographics**

three of the youth groups had emotional disabilities, three were intellectual disabilities, and one was cross-disability. Those with autism and intellectual disabilities made up a majority of the interviews. There were also three best practice groups that included students from Project Focus and the Youth Leadership Forum to determine if there were differences in their school experiences as a result of program involvement.

Those who participated were reimbursed with a \$40 gift card and refreshments. The individuals who participated were able to communicate verbally or with the use of assistive devices. Family members and personal care workers were also invited to attend to the youth groups, but the purpose of the group was to hear directly from the individuals with developmental disabilities.

Exploratory questions were derived from previous research and advisory group feedback to identify goals of youth and families, how they were preparing at home and at school, their social activities, concerns for the future, their strengths, school safety, agency involvement, and the ECAP (Education and Career Action Plan) and IEP process. The eighth grade groups were additionally asked about how they were getting ready for and their feelings about high

Table 5 reports the demographics of the students in these groups/interviews. Of the 25 parents interviewed, 11 were parents of students transitioning into high school. Provider organizations and school districts helped to recruit students and families. The group locations were representative of the population with the exception of Yuma where we over-sampled - two were in Tucson, four were in Yuma, two were in Mesa, one was in central Phoenix, and one was located in Goodyear.

While the goal was to separate the groups by disability to determine if there was a difference in responses, many reported multiple disabilities.

However, for the most part, the eighth grade groups were cross-disability,

school. The best practice groups were additionally asked to discuss how they found out about the program and what changed for them from before their involvement.

The groups were held at public, accessible sites and were approximately one hour long. The individual interviews were only 15-30 minutes long. The facilitator ensured that the discussion proceeded and that core questions, prompts, and probes were covered. Each focus group/interview was recorded and later transcribed verbatim by a transcription firm.

Twenty six key informants were also identified through snowball sampling and interviewed in 30 minute – 1 hour interviews. The informants included parent information centers; post-secondary employment training providers; disability-specific provider organizations; private school programs; education staff at school, district, and state levels in both the primary and secondary levels; government agencies that are part of transition planning; businesses; and self-advocacy organizations. The interviews were semi-structured allowing space for exploring within predetermined topics. The questions were modified over time when topics of interest developed or others were found to be irrelevant to the goals of research.

The data were analyzed using a constant comparative approach. The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA analytic software and open coded to identify key themes. The coding team included the researchers involved in the study. The codes that were developed represented overall content themes, ideas, and feelings that emanated from each group. MAXQDA was used to analyze the codes between the groups – how they were interconnected, how often they were mentioned, and whether or not there was agreement or disagreement in each thematic area.



Figure 27: Word Cloud of Study Findings

As patterns and themes began to emerge across transcriptions, and relationships between categories became apparent, each one was revisited using axial coding, memoing, and other inductive analytical strategies. Using a constant comparison method of interpretation



enabled us to revisit and locate a conceptually relevant literature to make sense of the patterns and themes captured. Figure 27 provides a visual representation of the themes discovered.

### **Study Limitations**

There are possible limitations using survey data obtained from youth and their parents. First, we only had student participants from school districts that wanted to participate in this study, which introduced bias. Second, although eligibility required students to comprehend questions in plain language or with assistance, some student might not be fully aware of the meaning of questions or their responses, depending on the level of their disabilities. Last, information from the family survey might be biased, since those who elected to participate may already be involved parents.

## APPENDIX B: KEY INTERVIEW QUOTES

<b>Interagency collaboration</b>	Parent Training and Information Center	We have to make our services, that are provided by all agencies...easy for people to understand, and not feel just overwhelmed by everything, because if they get to that point,...they probably will not access the services their son or daughter could really use.
	Agency rep	Individuals are unaware or do not know of services that will pay for transition services and schools are not plugging them into services.
	School district transition coordinator	They [agency staff] really don't show up for any of our IEP meetings even though they're invited. We do need for them to sit across the table from us so that we can provide the seamless transition, and they're just not there all of the time.
	Behavioral health agency	The schools, they block the agencies. They don't want—sometimes they just call the parents a day before. You know what? We're gonna review the IEP. Or, today, this week, you're gonna do the transitional. They don't give us enough time, case managers, or direct support to attend with them and help them out.
	Parent	"I want the speech therapist there, the occupational, the aide. I want everybody there [IEP meeting]... Parents are told, 'Oh, we're gonna continue because they're not here.' Parents don't know that they can say, 'I'm not gonna have it.'
<b>Middle/High School Transition</b>	Parent	They wait till the last minute [the end of summer] before they try and prepare them. We know it takes them a little bit longer than kids without disabilities to get in their transitional mode. The children with developmental disabilities, they need a little bit more time to transition, or a little bit more processing time, a little bit more one-on-one.
	Parent	I think that my expectation was that the aides would be better trained, in terms of knowing the students' disabilities, and that they would realize what a change it was for the students, and help them adjust. It was more like he was just pushed into the equivalent of salmon swimming upstream.
<b>School Involvement</b>	Parent	Usually they get involved in a club or something and they're not up to the club's standards are something like that or they're in with a bunch of kids that think of themselves as normies. Unless you have a....group of very tolerant kids.
	Student	I used to be in choir but I dropped it. The stage was too big. There were too many people. It made me nervous
	Student	Basically, what you need to learn to be popular and stuff is have a Facebook, have Instagram. Those are the two things that you need. Basically, when you get into high school, you need to focus on your supplies, and that you need to talk to people that you

		know, and then need to know other people.
	Student	I became a popular kid...They actually keep texting me, over and over. I already have 176 messages on my phone.
	Student	If you be popular, then you won't get into any fights or any of that. If you get into fights, then that goes into consequences and in troubles. If you will be popular, then you have friends that you can count on to help you with homework and stuff like that.
	Student	I'm pretty sure high school's gonna suck for everyone, if you're not involved. Like, no matter what, you're probably gonna get made fun of by lots of people.
<b>Bullying</b>	Parent	He got into trouble a couple of times last year. He has a bad problem with losing his temper because nobody wants to listen to him. He was brought home by the campus police.
	Student	I don't want kids near me. I just wanna hang out with teachers. That's it.
	Student	My mom always told me to stand up for myself and don't let anybody – if someone wants to hit you, hit 'em back because you wouldn't necessarily get in trouble cuz it's self-defense.
<b>Teachers</b>	Student	A good teacher would be a teacher that pays attention and is supportive in what you do.
	Parent	The child doesn't wanna go to anybody and ask for help because, every time they've tried, they've been shot down.
	Student	Let's say, you go to class, and all they do is give you notes. They don't talk to you. They don't teach you, and they say, "All you need to know is in your notes." When your test comes, you flunk the test because what you were supposed to know wasn't what you were supposed to know. It was totally something else. They just—and when you get in trouble, the first thing is, "I'm gonna send you to the office," where you're out of class. They won't ask you what's going on or why didn't you turn this in, or, "You have this low percentage in the class. You can make this up," or, "What's going on? Can I help you in some way?" They won't ask you. They won't help you.
	Parent	The parents are trying everything they can to help their children, and the kids keep saying the teachers don't wanna help, the teachers don't understand. The teachers wanna just say that they're not trying, that they're being a pain in the butt, and they just don't wanna put the effort forth to learn. When you go and try to talk to the teachers, the teachers are saying that they're doing everything they can and try and help your child. They're trying to convince you that your child is the one that's in the wrong. Then you wanna—you turn around and you try and discipline your child, when it's not your child that's in the wrong. Your child has a learning disability. Then everybody's wanting to say it's a lack of discipline. No, it's not a lack of discipline. I discipline my children...Okay, it's the teachers that don't wanna try.

	Parent	You have good teachers. You have bad teachers. I think it's also the expectations of the intensity of what—the expectations for the districts. Cuz, to be honest, it's like they have to meet certain standards. If they don't, they lose their funding. If you don't deal with the emotional and behavioral and social stuff, how are you ever gonna get to academic stuff?
<b>General Education Inclusion</b>	Parent	You're starting to see more integration, which is nice. Because now, they actually have a young lady who is on the cheer squad that does have a physical disability as well, which is the way it should be. Unfortunately, they haven't done much as far streamlining and having the kids make connections yet, which I think is probably in the future.
	Tom Lind, Assistant Superintendent, Phoenix Elementary School District No. 1	You can go into a classroom and not really know who the children with disabilities are. Obviously, the teachers do, but as a guest coming into the classroom, I really can't tell. Because either the teachers are doing whole group instruction, and one of the teachers is working with a small group of students that would include a variety of students – including students with disabilities or not.
	Ken Hosto, Director, Chapel Haven West	There is so much good out of inclusion, but we need to continue to work on expectations. If this is what is expected or not...work on expectations. The expectation for everyone to change to include you is not going to be there. I don't know that enough of that is happening to prepare our guys.
	Parent	I live [40 miles away]. He was being bussed all the way down to [the school]. Every time he got in trouble, we're like, "If we could get out there, we would take him back and forth to school, our self. Why are you telling us we need to come get our son? We have no way of getting out there.
<b>Independent Living</b>	Student	...It's just scary, this idea of having to start off on your own and to being alone in an apartment and trying to figure everything out. You just have so many responsibilities. You gotta make sure you're able to get a job, so you have to go to college. You can go to different colleges. I don't know, it's scary because I don't know, when I get there, how I'm gonna handle it. I think I have a lot of work to do, but I am learning.... I think, if I work really hard, I can achieve it, by the end of this year.
<b>Employment</b>	Doug Prentice, Transition Coordinator, Mesa Public Schools	Anytime you go to a business... if you mention disability, they automatically picture somebody whose very limited in their capacity for work. So just to kind of break that stereotype of what disability is, and it's not about what they can't do, it's about their ability. Get that into community member's minds and businesses to understand that we're not looking for a handout. We're looking for an opening so that the student can prove that they belong just like anybody else.
	Parent	He just worked in the classroom. They occasionally would do a few community activities, where they take him out to a grocery store.

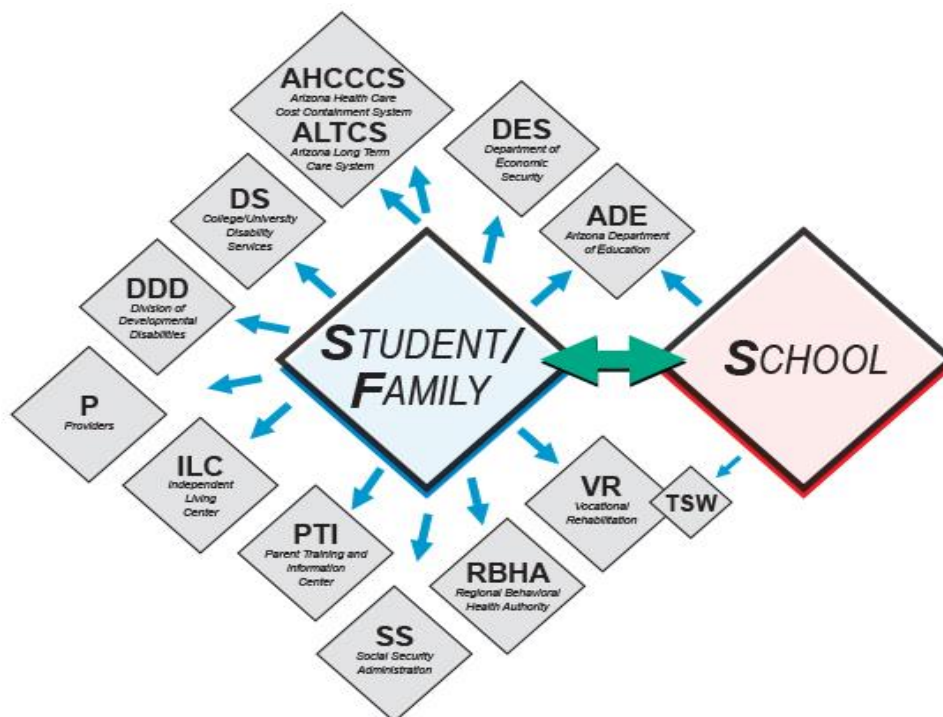
		They didn't do a lot of that. Maybe once every two months they might go out to a grocery store and buy stuff. My son is one of those kids that he needs a lotta prompting...You have to encourage him to do things. My hope is he just doesn't get lost because they don't have enough staff going with them.
	State agency representative	...have some very serious limitations and barriers that do pose difficulties in securing employment or continuing their education or even just continuing with normal social relationships. It's a very challenging disability. They don't have ID (intellectual disability) so they can handle academics, and it's that structure where they really thrive, but when they graduate, they lose that structure, and they just don't know what to do.
<b>CTE (Career Technical Education)</b>	Cliff Migal, Assistant Superintendent, West-MEC	What we're trying to do with our intervention specialist is we're trying to get them to go in and work with our instructional staff as well as some of the staff in satellite programs to begin to see that they can make accommodations for the students in our classes. It could be as simple as labeling, simple thing of adding a platform to be able to see what they are trying to see.
<b>Parent Expectations</b>	Parent	When I saw his schedule I almost said, "You know, let's see how this goes." Then I thought, "Great. So now he strangles a child and he can't come back the next day – or ever again, because I wanted to see if it worked, if he can actually handle this." You have to sometimes figure how much you're coddling your child and how much you're doing for them and protecting them. When they could have done it themselves...
	Parent	To say "I can go this far and I need help this much. I don't need help this much. I don't need Grandma taking me to the potty every day anymore. I'm not five, but I do need assistance here." That's where we want to find the balances.
	Parent	Yeah and that's why I don't put any limits on her, and I don't allow anybody else to put any limits on her. Because she has all these things that she wants to do and, yeah, this person might say, "No she might not be able to do it." "You shut your mouth. I am the mother here, and I can hold that vision for my baby."
<b>Parent Support</b>	Parent	We all could use some help with our children, and we demand it because they deserve it.
	Parent	I can tell you, me and a number of other parents, we don't feel the opportunities are there for our kids. We also don't feel that we're being provided information. For example, my friend ...whose son has Down syndrome—he's higher functioning than my son; he's quite verbal—she really had to push to get him into the Fry's job training program. He's gonna start in January. That was because she pushed to get it - not because the district was helping.
<b>IEP</b>	Student	One part of my IEP is that when I get stressed out, I can't really function very well in a classroom. I'm allowed to step out of the classroom and let myself calm down. That has helped me on multiple occasions to save myself from a meltdown.

	Student	I think an IEP helps a lot because I know I have some strengths in some areas. I might have difficulties in that same area, but not as much. I don't know. It's hard to explain, but once they gave me my accommodations, I was amazed cuz I can do the work. Sometimes I might miss a few things, and then they'll make up for that percentage, to give me what I need, and so it helps me with my classes with A's. I just, really recently, had—I think six finals were A's and one a B because of my IEP and mainstream classes.
	Student	If I have somebody sitting there, and I say like, "I wonder why," and they're explaining it to me, I can understand it. Then it's better cuz now I can say, "Okay, this is what I don't understand," without having to feel embarrassed raising my hand because I look stupid or something.
	Student	Basically, the teacher writes down things, and it becomes the ability for the teacher to help you with whatever you need help with. Then she prints it out, puts it on a piece of paper, and gives it to my mom.
	Student	Mostly our teachers do the IEP. They plan all that stuff out. We just go there, and we just listen. Sometimes we ask some questions.
	Student	I don't know why I got so many life skills classes. Ever since freshman year. All the way to senior I kept getting them. Like every semester I got one. I already took it like 14 times. I asked for—I asked for totally different things than what I got. Like when I elect things, I wanted culinary and autos. I didn't get it.
	Student	The hardest thing is trying to tell the aides that are in there to help you out. I've told one of the aides before I get a copy of the notes. Then they're like, "How do you know you get a copy of the—how do you know that's in your IEP? No. Have you ever seen your IEP? How do you know that's really in there? Where is it in there?" I almost feel like I need a copy of it to show them. I feel like if I don't, then they'll just be like, "Eh, you don't get it cuz you don't know what you're talking about."
	Parent	I've asked the teachers, "Do you know what's in my son's IEP?" Oh, well, I know he has a learning disability. Do you know where the—what are the accommodations that he's allowed? A lot of them don't know.
	Parent	For my son I didn't feel like there was any decisions I was able to make, if that makes any sense. We just talked about how much would be in his ED self-contained room and how much he would be out of that classroom. That's the only kinda decision. They didn't ask me about what courses he would go to. I don't even know if they had a conversation with him about the one class that he would go out of the ED room for.
	Parent Focus Group	Interviewee: They [the school] actually had an IEP meeting one time, without us. Then, he brought the papers home for us to sign. I refused. We never attended it. Interviewee: That's happened to us before.

		<p>Interviewee: They got mad at us because we called another IEP meeting.</p> <p>Interviewee: We just ended up signing the paper, though because we didn't know [our rights]. We were just like, "Okay."</p>
	Parent	<p>If you look at transition services for each year, they haven't changed...After graduation, Eddie will continue to live with his parents, explore independent living at a time appropriate. Eddie will continue to perform his daily living/recreation activities, learn his independent skills in the home and community, assisted by his parents and appropriate agencies. After graduation, he'll be employed in a job enclave in a music- or art-related field or greenhouse. After graduation, he'll participate in a day program or sheltered workshop...</p>
	Student	<p>We gotta put different details of what we do since the beginning of semester, middle of semester, and the end of semester. We share names, names you know,... Then they say, "Would you introduce yourself?" People around there introduce themselves. Pretty much you're in charge of your own IEP. It's like you're responsible for that.</p>



## APPENDIX C: AGENCY DESCRIPTIONS



A copy of navigating Arizona's medical system of care may be found at <http://www.azdhs.gov/phs/owch/ocshcn/documents/care-coordination-manual.pdf>

### Arizona Association of Providers of People with Disabilities (AAPPD)

**Services:** Statewide referral list of member providers.

Contact: <http://www.aappd.org/> or 602-510-9373

### Arizona Department of Economic Security

**Services:** Food stamps, child care, cash assistance, comprehensive medical and dental program, and foster care.

Contact: <https://www.azdes.gov/> or 602-542-4791

### Arizona Department of Economic Security Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD)

**Services:** Attendant care and housekeeping, coordination of acute care services for persons in DDD & ALTCS (e.g. adaptive aids, medical supplies, durable medical equipment, etc.), day treatment and training programs, habilitation, home health nurse or aide, respite, support coordination, therapies (occupational, physical or speech/language), and transportation.

Contact: [www.azdes.gov/ddd/default.asp](http://www.azdes.gov/ddd/default.asp) or 1-866-229-5553

### Arizona Department of Education, Dispute Resolution (ADE/DR)

**Services:** Special education early resolution, mediation, due process hearing, and state administrative complaint processes; parental and student rights and education information; facilitated IEP training; school personnel training and technical assistance provision.

Contact: [www.azed.gov/special-education/dispute/](http://www.azed.gov/special-education/dispute/) or 602-542-3084

**Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services (ADE/ESS)**

Services: School personnel training and technical assistance provision; parental and student rights and education information; data and accountability; monitoring and examining practices functions.

Contact: <http://www.azed.gov/special-education/> or 602-542-4013

**Arizona Department of Health Services Office of Children with Special Health Care Needs**

Services: Information and referral to families; and training to families and professionals on best practices related to medical home, cultural competence, transition to adulthood and family and youth involvement

Contact: <http://www.azdhs.gov/phs/owch/ocshcn/index.htm> or 602-542-1860

**Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS)**

Services: Medical assistance, food stamps and cash assistance

Contact: Apply at <http://www.azdhs.gov/phs/owch/ocshcn> or 602-417-7000

**Arizona Long Term Care (ALTCS)**

Services: Long term care services (acute medical services and home and community-based services), at little or no cost, to financially and medically eligible Arizona residents of any age with a developmental disability (DD) or is elderly or physically disabled (EPD)

Contact: <http://www.azahcccs.gov/applicants/application/ALTCS.aspx>

**Centers for Independent Living**

Services: There are five centers across the state that assist people with disabilities to live independently by providing information and referral, advocacy, peer support, independent living skills training, and transition services.

Contact: <http://www.azsilc.org/> (Statewide Independent Living Council)

**Parent Information Centers (Pilot Parents and Raising Special Kids)**

Services: Special education training and assistance to families of children with disabilities from birth to 26 years of age, information for families about using systems of care and health care financing, training for health care professionals to increase their knowledge and skills in working with families, advocacy with state programs for children with special health care needs, and parent to parent support.

Contact: Pilot Parents, 520-324-3150 or Raising Special Kids, 602-242-4366

**Regional Behavioral Health Authorities (Contracted with Arizona Department of Health Services/Division of Behavioral Health)**

Services: Treatment, crisis intervention, residential, inpatient, behavioral health day programs, prevention, skills training and development, psycho-educational services (pre-job training and development), ongoing support to maintain employment, case management, personal care services, peer support, family support, respite care, and supported housing

Contact: [www.azdhs.gov/bhs](http://www.azdhs.gov/bhs) or 602-364-4558

**Social Security Administration**

Services: Disability and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits

Contact: <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/> or 1-800-772-1213

**Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Rehabilitation Services Administration**

Services: Vocational counseling & guidance, assessments, career exploration, information about community resources, work readiness activities, on-the-job training, community college or university education, vocational or technical training

Contact: [https://www.azdes.gov/rehabilitation\\_services/](https://www.azdes.gov/rehabilitation_services/) or 1-800-563-1221

## **APPENDIX D: SAMPLE OF PRE-GRADUATION TRANSITION TIMELINE**

### **Age 14 (8th-9th grade)**

- Offer Parental Training
- Offer Student Training in life-long planning (Person Centered Planning)
- Self Directed IEP
- Explore recreational and leisure interests
- Discuss medical needs and related services
- Explore transportation needs
- Explore Independent Living Skills deficits
- Begin early career exploration
- Write Transition Goals in IEP
- At Evaluation/re-eval indicated need for transition services
- Include High School course of study in IEP
- Invite service providers to IEP – DDD/VR
- Consider options for summer programs
- Affiliate with needed specialty organizations (United Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy Foundation, Muscular Dystrophy Association, etc.)

### **Age 15 (9th-10th grade)**

- Discuss Supplemental Social Security (SSI) and Social Security work incentives (SSWI)
- Discuss funding sources for home services
- Participate in interest/vocational inventory (self-directed search)
- Review future living options
- Explore current and future living options
- Consider agency referrals to DES, DDD, VR, RBHA
- Write transition goals in the IEP.
- Invite service providers to IEP meeting
- Review high school course of study

### **Age 16 (10th-11th grade)**

- Participate in interest/vocational inventory (self-directed search)
- Discuss supported employment and job coaching
- Complete work rating scale
- Access career counseling and job shadowing
- Consider work training and post-secondary education options
- Obtain driver's license or state ID card
- Introduce concepts of guardianship, power of attorney, wills/trusts
- Write transition goals in the IEP
- Invite service providers to IEP meeting
- Review High school course of study
- Make referral to VR

### **Age 17 (11th-12th grade)**

- Functional Vocational Evaluation
- Enroll in Vocational Classes
- Discuss Taxes and Medical Insurance; other benefits
- Investigate financial aid
- Establish Graduation Date
- Visit vocational, educational, and residential options
- Register for and complete ACT or SAT testing, if appropriate
- Invite service providers to IEP meeting
- Review High school course of study
- Apply to/visit post –secondary education programs

#### **Age 18 (12th grade +)**

- Apply for post-secondary services
- Include adult service providers in transition planning meeting (write transition goals)
- Apply for Income support (SSI), public aid and general assistance
- Implement guardianship, power of attorney, wills/trust
- Contact special needs coordinator at college, if appropriate
- Register to vote
- Invite service providers to IEP meetings.
- Review high school course of study

#### **Age 19-21 (12 +)**

- Post-secondary education with follow up services
- Apply for Medicaid, if appropriate
- Pursue Adult education
- Development of an interagency agreement with local service providers.
- Systematic phase out of school supports and phase in of adult services
- Invite service providers to IEP meetings.
- Review high school course of study

## GLOSSARY

The following list contains special education terms, definitions and acronyms that are commonly used by schools during the IEP process and are discussed in this report.

**Assessment or Evaluation:** Term used to describe the testing and diagnostic processes leading up to the development of an appropriate IEP for a student with special education needs.

**Autism:** A brain development disorder characterized by impaired social interaction, communication and by restricted and repetitive behavior. Signs usually begin before a child is 3 years old.

**Center-Based Employment/Sheltered Workshops:** These programs offer skills training, special certificate commensurate wage rate work (i.e. sub-minimum wage), prevocational services, group work placements, and recreation and leisure activities in segregated settings with other workers with disabilities.

**Competitive Employment:** Self-employment or work alongside others with no disability in a community, non-segregated setting that is performed on a full- or part-time basis that is at least equal to the higher of the federal or state minimum wage.

**Day training/treatment program: adult day settings:** Programs that teach independent living, social skills, employment training, and recreation in a congregate setting with supports.

**Disability:** Physical or mental condition that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

**Disproportionality:** The “overrepresentation” and “underrepresentation” of a particular demographic group in special education programs relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population.

**Emotional Disability (ED):** Term used to describe a diagnosable mental, behavioral or emotional disorder that lasts for a significant duration that meets the criteria within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

**Exception Student Services (ESS):** Arizona’s special education system.

**Group-Supported Employment (GSE, i.e. enclaves):** Groups of people with disabilities that work together to perform the same job in a community, non-segregated setting with a job coach.

**Inclusion:** Term used to describe services that place students with disabilities in general education classrooms with appropriate support services. Student may receive instruction from both a general education teacher and a special education teacher.

**Individual Supported Employment:** This is individualized supervision on the job according to the individual's abilities. This can be offered either through natural or formal supports. Natural support tends to be a preferred option as on-the-job assistance and role modeling is offered by peers, supervisors and colleagues, thus there is no differential treatment based on disability. Formal support is offered by state and federally funded job coaches.

**Intellectual Disability:** Characterized by below average cognitive functioning in two or more adaptive behaviors with onset before age 18.

**Job Coach:** State and federally funded staff persons who provide assistance and training to workers with disabilities while on the job. This type of support is extended to individuals, as well as to groups of people with disabilities working together in the community.

**Mainstreaming:** Term used to describe the integration of children with special needs into regular classrooms for part of the school day. The remainder of the day is in a special education classroom.

**Other Health Impairment:** Term used to describe limited strength, vitality and alertness that results in limited ability in the educational environment. Impairment could be a result of chronic health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder, epilepsy, heart condition, hemophilia, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever and sickle cell anemia.

**Learning Disability:** Special education term used to define a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language spoken or written that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical equations.

**Speech and Language Impairments:** Communication disorders such as stuttering, impaired articulation, language impairment or voice impairment.

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI):** SSI is a Social Security program that pays monthly benefits to those with limited resources who are 65 and over, have blindness, or have a disability. The maximum monthly benefits for individuals are \$710 in 2013 – significantly less than the federal poverty guideline.



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Office of John Huppenthal. *Annual Report of the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction*. Rep. Vol. 1-2. N.p.: Arizona Department of Education, 2014. Web. <<http://www.azed.gov/superintendent/superintendents-annual-report/>>

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<sup>3</sup> Baer, R.W., Daviso, A.W., Flexer, R.W., Queen, R.M., and Meindl, R.S. (2011). Students with intellectual disabilities: predictors of transition outcomes. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 34(3), 132–141; Kozleski, E. B., & Smith, A. (2009). The complexities of systems change in creating equity for students with disabilities in urban schools. *Urban Education*, 44, 427-451.

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<sup>9</sup> Interaction is defined in this study as texting, talking on the phone, instant messaging, or visiting face-to-face, so transportation does not necessarily impact interaction.

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- <sup>12</sup> Inclusive Schools Network, Self-Assessment. Retrieved from <http://blog.inclusiveschools.org/test-quiz-page/>
- <sup>13</sup> Government Accountability Office. (2012). CHARTER SCHOOLS: Additional Federal Attention Needed to Help Protect Access for Students with Disabilities. GAO-12-543
- <sup>14</sup> ADE, *Annual Report of the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, Fiscal Years 2012-2013*.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201405-charter.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> Personal communication, Aiden Fleming, ADE Legislative Liaison. July 17, 2014.
- <sup>18</sup> Students with IEPs are legally required to start transition planning at the age of 16; however, it is recommended that these activities start by the age of 14.
- <sup>19</sup> Baer, R. M., Flexer, R. W., Beck S., Amstutz, N., Hoffman, L., Brothers, J., et al. (2003). A collaborative followup study on transition service utilization and post-school outcomes. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 26, 7-25; Bullis, M., Davis, C., Bull, B., & Johnson, B. (1995). Transition achievement among young adults with deafness: What variables relate to success? *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 39, 130-150; Carter et al., 2011; Doren, B., & Benz, M. R. (1998). Employment inequality revisited: Predictors of better employment outcomes for young women with disabilities in transition. *The Journal of Special Education*, 31, 425-442; Rabren, K., Dunn, C., & Chambers, D. (2002). Predictors of post-high school employment among young adults with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 25, 25-40.
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<sup>24</sup> <http://morrisoninstitute.asu.edu/sites/default/files/content/products/AZ%20Ed%20Financing.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> To calculate the percentages for fiscal year 2012-2013, the various special education unweighted ADM counts were multiplied by their respective weights in accordance to ARS 15-943(2b). The resulting weighted ADM was then multiplied by the per pupil "base level" that was in effect for the year pursuant to ARS 15-901B2 to derive the state's responsibility of special education. The total "federal grants in aid for special education" was used for the federal portion. Both the state and federal allocations were subtracted from the total actual special education expenses for both district and charter schools to derive a local percentage.

<sup>26</sup> Office of Post Secondary Education. (March, 2014). *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listing: 1990-1991 through 2014-2015* (U.S. Department of Education). Washington, D.C. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/tsa.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Office of Post Secondary Education. (March, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Bogenschutz, M., & Hewitt, A. (2014). Direct Support Workforce Supporting Individuals With IDD: Current Wages, Benefits, and Stability. *Intellectual and ...*, 52(5), 317–329. doi:10.1352/1934-9556-52.5.317; American Network of Community Options and Resources. (2010). 2009 direct support professionals wage study. Alexandria, VA: Author;

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.colemaninstitute.org/declaration>

<sup>32</sup> The IEP is an annual education plan, required by IDEA, developed in concert with the student, parent, and school staff. The IEP ensures that students with disabilities have the supports needed to help them learn to the best of their abilities.

<sup>33</sup> We offered interviews to those students who were anxious about talking in focus groups.