

the graduation cliff



IMPROVING POST-SCHOOL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Arizona Disconnection Rate

Ages 16-24, from 2008 to 2012



The disconnection rate is the percentage of total youth between the ages of 16 and 24 that is neither employed nor in school.

More than one in 10 Arizona public high school students have disabilities – one-third of these youth remain unengaged in work or education following graduation. This leaves a substantial number of young Arizonans stuck at home, often idle, unhappy and unproductive, creating a significant public policy challenge for the state.

Why is this so? How can we better prepare our youth with disabilities to play a role in Arizona's economic development? Read our findings inside.

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

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



ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

finding 1: STUDENTS ARE OPTIMISTIC, ADULTS MORE CAUTIOUS

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

There is a disconnect between adults and youth that may impede the 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, the students were positive. But their parents' expectations, when controlling by the significance of the youth's disability, were slightly lower.

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

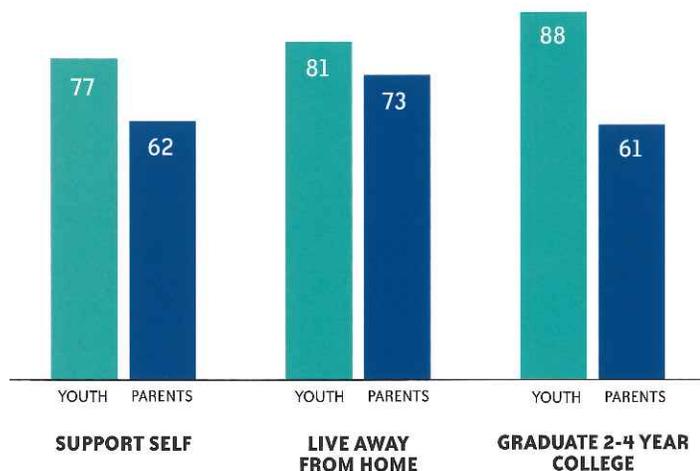
Similarly, when controlling for significance of disability, the intervention of government agencies has a negative effect on student outlook, regardless of disability. Students and parents who receive governmental help report that the student will be less likely to live away from home, get a paid job,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

“What we're talking about in the world we work in every day is that we build in accommodations for a student that has a disability or does not have a disability. But once you put the 'disability' label on it, then you have folks that say, 'Okay, how do I deal with that?'”

— Cliff Migal, Assistant Superintendent, West-MEC

Expectations of Youth and Parents

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



finding 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A JOB

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

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

Description of Participant Jobs

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

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

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

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

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

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

finding 3: EXCLUSION IMPACTS FUTURE PROSPECTS

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

Bullying is a serious problem among students with disabilities. In the research, 18% reported being bullied or picked on by other students at least once a week. Parents gave a higher number – 38%. Bullying has a significant negative predictive

effect on students’ future aspirations and self-efficacy. Those who have been bullied feel that they are less likely to graduate high school or support themselves financially after graduation. Further, being attacked or being involved in fights at school were predictive of being suspended. This is a significant problem among students with disabilities, with 25% of students in the family sample having been suspended. This negatively impacts their expectations to graduate high school or college.

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

“Having positive support systems in place has just played a big role in improving the climate and culture on the school campus which then improves the opportunities for kids to learn in an environment that’s safe and secure for them so that we can focus on the academics rather than the discipline.

— Tom Lind, Assistant Superintendent, Phoenix Elementary School District No. 1

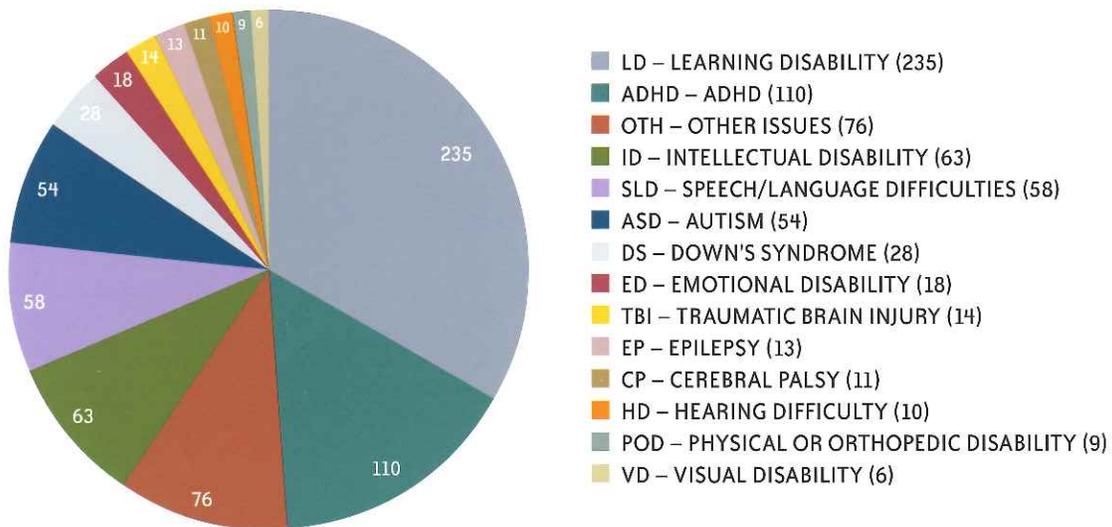
conclusion

Overall, students and families are generally satisfied with their education, but the initial 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. A host of recent federal and state initiatives has targeted key determinants aimed at reaching these solutions, including greater access to mainstream curriculum, increasing self-determination and self-advocacy skills, setting career goals, involving parents in education and career planning, and independent living skills training. Having a school leadership that supports these initiatives can change the paradigm, so that having no expectations for 11% of our high school students is no longer the expectation.



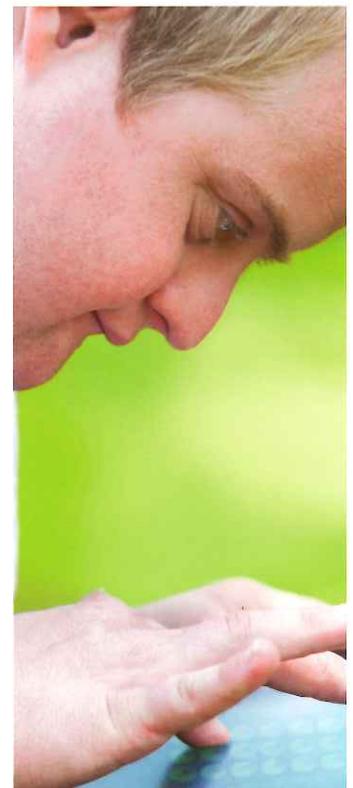
To address these questions, ASU’s Morrison Institute for Public Policy surveyed 224 Arizona parents and guardians and 634 high school students with disabilities from 17 districts. The institute also conducted 10 focus groups that included family members and middle and high school youth. It further interviewed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

Study Participants: Youth and Family by Disability



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

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





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

Thank You to The ASU Transition Study Advisory Committee

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Established in 1982, Morrison Institute for Public Policy is a statewide leader in examining critical issues for Arizona and the region, and is a catalyst for public dialogue. An Arizona State University resource, Morrison Institute uses nonpartisan research, analysis and public outreach to help improve the state’s quality of life.

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

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