



# Facts From NLTS2

## High School Completion by Youth With Disabilities

Whether youth complete high school or leave without finishing can be associated with both economic and social disadvantages, with dropouts experiencing a higher likelihood of unemployment and arrest and lower life-time earnings than graduates (U.S. Department of Commerce 2004; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1995). Data regularly collected by the U.S. Department of Education on high school completion and dropout rates for the general population show that school completion is less common among some demographic groups than others, including those from lower-income households and students who are Hispanic, for example (U.S. Department of Education 2005). Similar national data for students with disabilities are not routinely collected,<sup>1</sup> so trends in school-leaving status and differential school completion rates for different demographic groups among youth with disabilities are unknown.

Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)<sup>2</sup> are designed to provide a national picture<sup>3</sup> of the rate at which secondary school students with disabilities complete high school and how they fare in their early postschool years. Further, comparisons of findings from NLTS2 and the original NLTS<sup>4</sup> enables an investigation of changes in school completion rates from 1987 through 2003.

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<sup>1</sup> The Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education regularly reports data on the ways in which students with disabilities exit special education (U.S. Department of Education 2003), which can include dropping out, graduating, and reaching the maximum age for special education services, but those figures are confounded with other modes of leaving special education, such as returning to general education classes.

<sup>2</sup> The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) has a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 students who were in at least seventh grade and receiving special education services in the 2000-01 school year. This sample represents a total of 1,838,848 youth with disabilities, according to federal child count figures (U.S. Department of Education 2002). Twenty-eight percent of the youth represented in NLTS2, or about half a million youth, had left school by spring 2003, when parents and youth were interviewed.

<sup>3</sup> Data reported here are population estimates from data weighted to represent students in each disability category who attended school in the kinds of districts from which they were sampled.

<sup>4</sup> The National Longitudinal Transition Study was conducted by SRI International (SRI) for OSEP from 1985 through 1993. SRI is conducting NLTS2 currently. For comparisons with NLTS2, statistical adjustments were made to the studies' samples to include only same-age youth. In both samples used in these analyses, 19% of youth are 15 through 17, 31% are 18, and 50% are 19. In addition, the composition of some disability categories was adjusted so that categories were defined similarly at the two time points (e.g., the separate categories of deaf and hearing impaired that were in use in 1987 were combined in these analyses to be comparable to the single category of hearing impairment in use in 2001). See Wagner, Newman, Cameto, and Levine (2005), for additional details on adjustments to the studies' samples and findings regarding changes over time in outcomes of youth with disabilities.

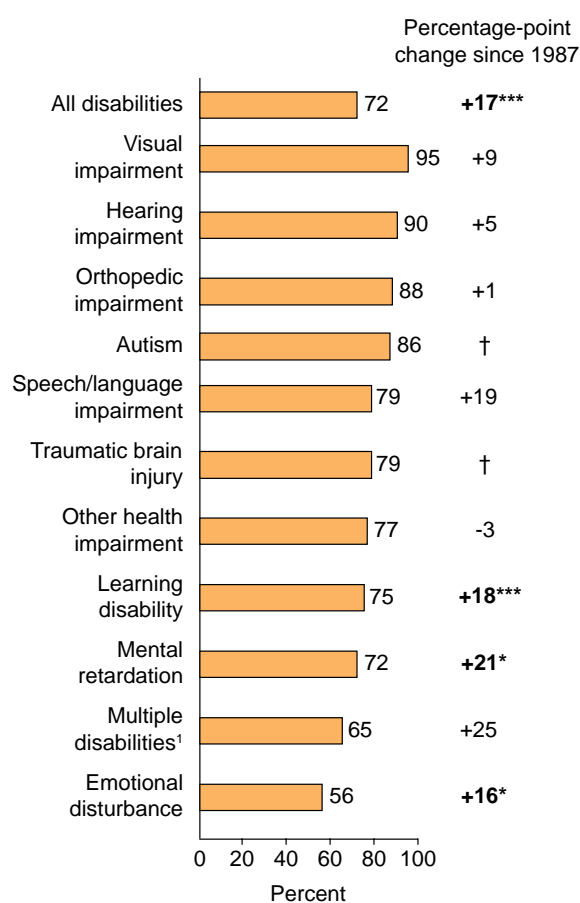
## School Completion Status

Parents' interview responses in 2003 indicate that 72 percent of out-of-school<sup>5</sup> youth with disabilities complete high school<sup>6</sup> by receiving either a regular diploma or a certificate of completion or similar document (figure 1).<sup>7</sup> The rate of high school completion in that same year for youth with disabilities overall was 17 percentage points higher than the rate in 1987.<sup>8</sup> Among the 28 percent who do not complete high school, the most common reasons reported are their dislike of their school experience (36 percent) and poor relationships with teachers and students (17 percent).

## Disability Category Differences<sup>9</sup>

School completion rates are quite high among youth with visual or hearing impairments (95 percent and 90 percent, respectively), as well as among those with orthopedic impairments (88 percent) or autism (86 percent). However, because these are low-incidence categories of disability (e.g., NLTS2 represents about 22,000 youth with hearing impairments, slightly fewer youth with orthopedic impairments, almost 15,000 youth

Figure 1. Reported high school completion status, by federal statutory disability category



\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

† Not applicable; these categories were not in use in 1987.

<sup>1</sup> Includes the category of deaf-blindness.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), "Wave 2 Parent/Youth Interview, 2003."

with autism, and about 8,000 youth with visual impairments), their relatively high rates of school completion do not affect the average for all youth with disabilities to the extent that rates for higher-incidence categories do. For example, the school completion rate is 75 percent for the largest category, learning disability (NLTS2 represents more than 1,130,000 youth with learning disabilities). School completion rates for youth in four other categories are between 72 percent and 79 percent. Lower rates are apparent for youth

<sup>5</sup> Approximately 1,220 NLTS2 sample members were out of school, including almost 900 graduates and approximately 325 dropouts.

<sup>6</sup> The school completion rate is the number of youth who were reported by parents in Wave 2 telephone interviews (2003) no longer to be attending high school and who left high school by receiving a regular diploma or certificate of completion, divided by the total number of youth reported no longer to be attending high school. Youth were ages 15 through 19.

<sup>7</sup> These school completers are referred to as graduates in the remainder of this fact sheet.

<sup>8</sup> The statistical significance of differences between groups and of changes over time was determined by two-tailed  $F$  tests.

<sup>9</sup> The terminology for classifying students who receive special education services that is used here is specified in federal regulations for the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (P.L. 105-17), 111 Stat. 37-157 (Knoblauch and Sorenson 1998).

with multiple disabilities or deaf-blindness and youth with emotional disturbances, among whom 65 percent and 56 percent are high school completers, respectively.

Significant increases in school completion are noted for three of the four disability categories whose members had the lowest school completion rates in 1987: learning disability (18 percentage points), mental retardation (21 percentage points), and emotional disturbance (16 percentage points).<sup>10</sup>

### Demographic Differences

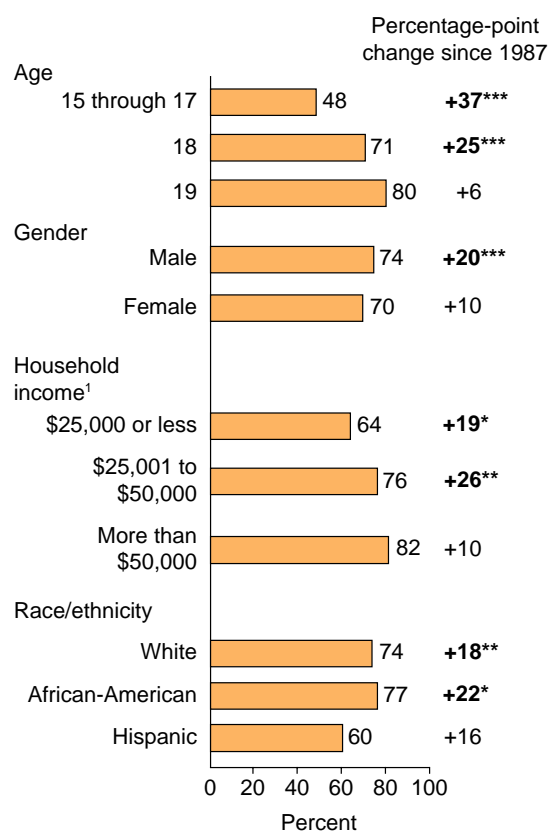
Differences in the rate at which out-of-school youth with disabilities complete high school are apparent for groups who differ in selected demographic characteristics (figure 2).

**Age.** Not surprisingly, the lowest high school completion rate (48 percent) occurs among youth with disabilities who were ages 15 through 17 and not in school, ages at which most youth typically still would be in high school. However, this youngest group experienced the largest increase over time in the likelihood of finishing school (37 percentage points).

The high school completion rate is significantly higher among 18-year-olds than 15- through 17-year-olds—71 percent—a 25-percentage-point increase since 1987. The school completion rate is highest (80 percent) among out-of-school 19-year-olds with disabilities, although this is not a significantly higher rate than in 1987.

**Household income.** The completion rate is significantly higher among youth with disabilities from wealthier households (i.e., with incomes of more than \$50,000) than

Figure 2. High school completion status of youth with disabilities, by demographic characteristics



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>1</sup> For comparisons with 1987, the income distribution in both years is divided into equal thirds to create a common metric for the 2 years.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), "Wave 2 Parent/Youth Interview, 2003."

among low-income youth (82 percent vs. 64 percent), an income-related difference that also is apparent in the general population (Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman 2001). However, both the lowest and middle income groups show significant increases over time in their school completion rates (19 and 26 percentage points, respectively), an increase not shared by the highest income group.

**Race/ethnicity.** Although Hispanic youth with disabilities appear to have a lower rate of school completion than White or African-American peers (60 percent vs. 74 percent and

<sup>10</sup> Increases among youth in the speech/language impairment and multiple disabilities/deaf-blindness categories do not reach statistical significance, possibly because of the small sizes or large standard errors of those groups.

77 percent), this difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, although all three racial/ethnic groups demonstrate similar increases over time in their school completion rates, only the increases for White and African-American youth with disabilities reach statistical significance (18 and 22 percentage points, respectively).

**Gender.** No differences are noted in the school completion rates of boys and girls with disabilities. However, boys show a statistically significant increase over time that is not evident for girls (20 vs. 10 percentage points for boys and girls, respectively).

### What Happens Next?

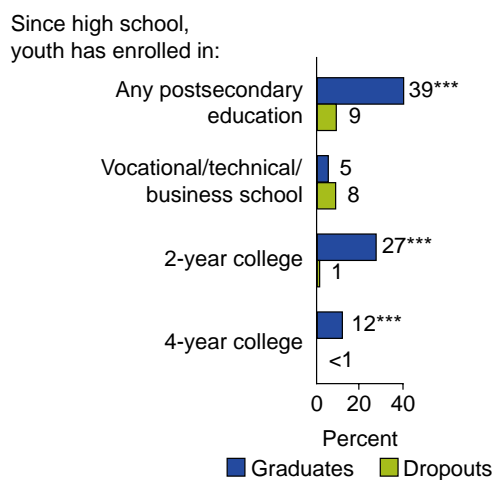
The period that extends from the end of high school through a youth's twenties challenges youth with decisions regarding education, careers, marriage, and parenting; demands for financial and residential independence; and the myriad responsibilities (legal, social, and personal) that accompany adulthood (Osgood et al. 2005). In the first few years after high school, the paths into young adulthood of youth with disabilities who finish high school diverge in important ways from those followed by youth with disabilities who do not finish high school. The following sections focus on youth with disabilities who had been out of school from a few weeks up to 2 years and describes their activities in the areas of education, employment, independence, and community participation.<sup>11</sup>

**Participation in high school diploma/certificate programs.** Dropping out of school is not an irrevocable decision. Young people may still obtain a high school diploma by reentering a regular or alternative secondary school program or by taking an examination to obtain a General Educational Development

(GED) credential. Up to 2 years after leaving high school, 29 percent of youth with disabilities who had dropped out had taken one or more classes or tests to earn a high school diploma, and almost one-third of those program participants had earned a high school diploma or certificate—i.e., 9 percent of all dropouts with disabilities. Although obtaining a GED or following another degree path does not overcome the labor market disadvantage for dropouts compared with graduates, GED holders in the general population have been found to earn higher wages than uncredentialed dropouts (Tyler 2003).

**Postsecondary school enrollment.** One of the clearest advantages of finishing high school is that it provides the necessary foundation for pursuing most postsecondary education opportunities, which is critically important if youth with disabilities are to participate fully in an economy that is increasingly knowledge based. The advantage of finishing high school is evident in the rates of postsecondary school enrollment of youth with disabilities (figure 3).

Figure 3. Postsecondary education enrollment of youth with disabilities, by high school completion status

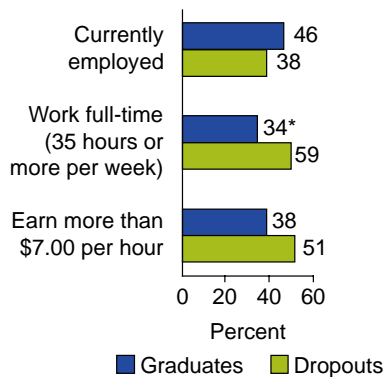


\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), "Wave 2 Parent/Youth Interview, 2003."

<sup>11</sup> A more detailed account of the experiences of youth with disabilities in the first years after high school is available in Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, et al. (2005).

Figure 4. Employment experiences of youth with disabilities, by high school completion status



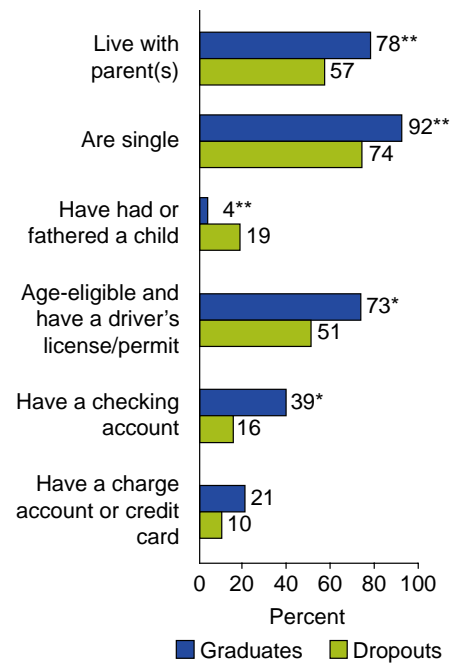
\* $p < .05$ .

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), "Wave 2 Parent/Youth Interview, 2003."

Within 2 years of leaving high school, 39 percent of graduates with disabilities enroll in some kind of postsecondary education institution, more than four times the enrollment rate of dropouts (9 percent). Two-year or community colleges are the most popular kind of postsecondary school among graduates; 27 percent of graduates enroll in such schools. In contrast, high school dropouts are most likely to attend vocational, technical, or business schools; 8 percent of dropouts do so. About 1 in 8 graduates enroll in a 4-year college; not surprisingly, virtually no dropouts do.

**Employment.** The advantages that accrue to high school graduates with disabilities in the postsecondary education arena are not evident in the employment domain in the first years after high school (figure 4). There is no statistically significant difference between those who do and do not finish high school in the likelihood of working for pay outside the home; 46 percent of graduates are working, as are 38 percent of dropouts. Neither do the hourly wages of the two groups differ; 38 percent of graduates with disabilities and 51 percent of dropouts earn more than \$7.00

Figure 5. Independence and family formation of youth with disabilities, by high school completion status



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), "Wave 2 Parent/Youth Interview, 2003."

per hour. However, graduates are much less likely than dropouts to work full-time (34 percent vs. 59 percent), in part because graduates are more likely than dropouts to be attending a postsecondary school.

**Independence.** Both youth with disabilities who finished high school and those who did not begin to demonstrate several aspects of adult independence in their first few years after high school (figure 5).

About three-fourths (78 percent) of high school graduates are living with one or both parents up to 2 years after high school. The large majority of graduates (92 percent) are single, and few (4 percent) have had or fathered a child. In contrast, significantly fewer high school dropouts with disabilities (57 percent) live with parents. Similarly, many fewer dropouts (74 percent) are single, and

almost five times as many dropouts as graduates are parents (19 percent).

Even though dropouts are more likely than graduates to be living independently and to have the responsibilities of parenthood, they are less likely to have the mobility that comes with having driving privileges. Almost three-fourths (73 percent) of age-eligible graduates with disabilities have a driver's license or permit, compared with about half (51 percent) of dropouts. Dropouts also are less likely than graduates to have one of the financial management tools that are markers of adulthood—a checking account (16 percent vs. 39 percent).

**Community participation.** NLTS2 has investigated several aspects of community participation by youth with disabilities, including taking part in organized community groups and in volunteer or community service activities. Overall, 31 percent of graduates with disabilities take part in organized community groups within 2 years of finishing high school, and 30 percent take part in volunteer or community service activities. This is not significantly different from the 19 percent and 18 percent of dropouts who are thus engaged. Taking part in the political process through voting is another positive form of community participation. In the early years after high school, 69 percent of graduates with disabilities are registered to vote, significantly more than the 48 percent of dropouts who are.

## Summing Up

There has been an increase over time in the percentage of youth with disabilities who complete high school; according to NLTS2, 72 percent achieve that milestone. However, this mark of success is much more common for some youth than others. Those with sensory or orthopedic impairments finish school at much higher rates, for example, than youth with multiple disabilities or emotional

disturbances. Hispanic youth with disabilities and those from the lowest-income households also lag behind others in their high school completion rates.

Whether youth with disabilities finish or drop out of high school is associated with marked differences in their experiences in the early postschool years. A high school diploma gives graduates with disabilities access to a college education that is unavailable to most dropouts. Although the two groups are equally likely to be working for pay after high school, dropouts work longer hours, on average, thereby generating greater income.

But the decision to drop out of high school is reversible. About 3 in 10 dropouts with disabilities pursue a high school diploma within 2 years of first leaving school, and about one-third of those youth with disabilities earn their high school credential in that time period.

## Looking Ahead

This report on the school completion status of youth with disabilities focuses on the very early years after they leave high school. Because NLTS2 is longitudinal, it offers the opportunity to revisit the question of how graduates and dropouts with disabilities fare as they transition to adulthood, including, for example, whether larger proportions of dropouts eventually earn a diploma or completion certificate or obtain postsecondary education, and how the earnings of graduates and dropouts compare as they have greater experience in the labor market.

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