

6. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Chapter 1 identified a variety of changes in population, economics, technology, legislation, and other areas that could be expected to contribute to changes in the characteristics and experiences of young people with disabilities. Indeed, this report has identified changes that have occurred in the population of 15- to 17-year-old youth with disabilities since 1987 regarding their individual and household characteristics, the services they received from schools, and their outcomes in multiple domains. Summing up these changes raises the question, “Have they been for the better?” In many respects, the answer to that question is “yes,” but that answer applies to some youth more than to others. Findings also point to several challenges remaining for youth with disabilities, their families, and the schools that serve them.

Positive Changes

Several changes among youth with disabilities would be construed by many as being “in the right direction.”

The racial/ethnic makeup of youth with disabilities has become more like that of the general population of youth. The disproportionate representation of minority children and youth among those receiving special education is of national concern (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Comparisons between youth with disabilities in 1987 and 2001 suggest that the disproportionality is moderating. Youth of color accounted for similar proportions of those with disabilities and those in the general population in 2001, whereas they had been overrepresented by about 4 percentage points in 1987. This shift resulted from African Americans being a smaller proportion of youth with disabilities in 2001 than in 1987. However, African American youth continued to be a larger percentage of youth with mental retardation than other categories of disability. The increase in the proportion of youth who were Hispanic was similar among youth with disabilities and youth in the general population.

Youth with disabilities were living in households that may have been better able to support their positive development. In 2001, youth with disabilities were more likely to be living with their parents, and as a group, those parents were better educated and more likely to be employed than was true in 1987. Consistent with improved education and increased employment, youth also were less likely to be living in poverty or receiving Food Stamps, thereby narrowing the sizable gap on these factors that had existed in 1987. These changes could bode well, in that fewer youth with disabilities were at risk for the poor outcomes associated with poverty (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Parents also had higher expectations for youth with disabilities in terms of achieving a 2-year college education and finding employment. Research has demonstrated that high parental expectations are associated with improved outcomes (e.g., Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998; Wagner et al., 1993).

Youth were having their disabilities identified and were receiving services for them earlier. Developments in brain research have confirmed the importance of the early years in maximizing children’s development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Thus, it is encouraging that cohort 2 youth were more likely to have had their disabilities identified earlier than youth in cohort 1, with the average age at identification dropping from 6.6 to 5.9 years. The largest declines were among categories of youth who were oldest at identification in cohort 1—those

with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or orthopedic or other health impairments. Services also began for cohort 2 youth 13 months earlier, on average, than for youth in cohort 1. This narrowed the gap between age at identification and age at first service to 1.5 years, down from almost 2 years in 1987.

Youth with disabilities were increasingly likely to be provided a variety of related or support services from or through their schools. In 1987, 57% of youth with disabilities received at least one of eight specific related or support services; in 2001, almost three-fourths of youth were receiving one or more of such services. Virtually all of the increase in these services resulted from schools providing them to more students. Schools provided related or support services to one-third of 15- to 17-year-old students in 1987, but to one-half of them in 2001. Significant increases were apparent in students receiving speech/language therapy, vocational and mental health services, physical and hearing loss therapies, and transportation assistance. The poorest youth with disabilities also were more likely to be receiving SSI benefits in 2001 than in 1987.

Youth were increasingly likely to be at the typical grade level for their age, rather than being “behind” their age peers in school. Being behind the typical grade level for their age is a powerful predictor of youth with disabilities dropping out of school (Wagner, 1991). Among the largest changes identified in the NLTS/NLTS2 comparison was the increase in students being at grade level for their age. Whereas only one-third of youth with disabilities were at grade level in 1987, more than half were in 2001.

Youth with disabilities became increasingly involved in extracurricular activities of several kinds, particularly those in the community. “Presence and participation” at school and in the community have been identified as key outcome areas for youth with disabilities (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 1994). Overall, the percentage of youth participating in any kind of extracurricular group activity was stable over time, as was participation in some specific kinds of groups, including sports teams. However, substantially greater participation occurred in community groups, volunteer and community service activities, and some kinds of school extracurricular groups, suggesting that youth with disabilities who participated in groups were active in a wider range of extracurricular activities, particularly outside of school.

Employment in the preceding year had become more common among youth with disabilities, reaching a level similar to that of youth in the general population. Earnings also increased markedly, with two-thirds of employed youth making more than the minimum wage in 2001, compared with only about 40% in 1987. Consistent with more youth earning wages, the percentage of youth with disabilities who had money about which they could make their own decisions also increased. In addition, fewer employed youth were working more than 16 hours per week, a potentially beneficial change in light of the link between working longer hours and poor outcomes (Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1998). It is unknown how much of the improved employment picture resulted from an improved economy, increased provision of vocational services by schools to youth with disabilities, or other factors.

Unequal Distribution of Positive Changes

Positive changes did not accrue to all youth with disabilities equally. Because they were by far the largest group among adolescents with disabilities, those with learning disabilities had a pattern of change very like that of the population as a whole. Others differed markedly. For example, youth with mental retardation had the smallest improvements in household circumstances on several dimensions—virtually no movement out of poverty and no reduction in the rate at which they had an unemployed head of household. They also had the smallest improvement in the percentage who were at grade level, and did not share in the improved youth employment picture in terms either of their employment rate or earnings. Yet, they were the only group to have a significant decline in their dropout rate.

In contrast, youth with other health impairments changed dramatically in makeup, largely as a result of the sizable increase in youth with autism or AD/HD. This group had increases of 20 percentage points or more in the proportion who were white and who were male, resulting in more such students in this group than in virtually any other category. They did not share in the increased language diversity experienced by most other categories, and outpaced many others in improvements in the economic conditions of their households. Youth with other health impairments enjoyed substantial improvements in youth employment and earnings, yet also were more likely than almost all other categories of youth to have behavior problems that resulted in negative consequences.

Besides differences among disability categories, there also were differences in the kinds of changes experienced by youth who differed in gender, household income, and race/ethnicity. Some of the differences between groups in rates of change may have been beneficial. For example, girls with disabilities were more likely than boys to experience increases in parents' expectations that they "definitely" would find paid employment in the future. The increase in the actual employment rate was larger for girls as well, bringing both employment expectations and employment experiences to similar levels for the two genders. Consistent with increased employment, girls had a larger increase than boys in having money about which they could make decisions.

It also is noteworthy that the largest increase in the percentage of youth with disabilities who received any of the support services investigated in the two studies was among the lowest income youth, who may have been in greater need of services to ameliorate the risk factors often associated with poverty. Lower income and African American and Hispanic youth also experienced the greatest improvement in the employment of their heads of household. And the gap between middle-income and higher income youth closed on several measures, including, for example, parent employment and expectations for the future of their adolescent children.

However, other disparities among groups were potentially of more concern. For example, lower income youth did not experience the same decline in the age at first service for a disability or increase in being at grade level as higher income youth. Nor did employed lower income youth with disabilities have earnings gains of the same magnitude as the middle-income and higher income groups. Further, African American and Hispanic youth did not share equally in the move out of poverty or in the reduced dropout rate experienced by white youth.

Remaining Challenges

Despite these real and important improvements on many fronts in the circumstances and experiences of youth with disabilities, the positive picture is balanced with areas of potential continuing concern.

Youth with disabilities continued to be more likely than youth in the general population to live in households with characteristics that could put them at risk for poor outcomes.

Youth with disabilities continued to be much more likely to be in poverty and to have a poorly educated or unemployed head of household than other youth. One in five youth also lived in a household with an adult member with a disability, a doubling of that rate since 1987.

Parents reported a gap of about 18 months between the average age at which youth were identified as having a disability and the age at which they first received services for them. This gap resulted in many children coming to school with identified disabilities for which no intervention had been received. For example, on average, youth with mental retardation had been identified as having that disability at age 4, but did not receive services until almost 6 years of age, when they entered school. Similarly, youth with other health impairments were younger than 5 when their disabilities were identified, but almost 7 before services were provided to them. Narrowing that gap potentially could benefit the school performance and other outcomes of youth with disabilities.

A substantial number of youth with disabilities continued not to be able to keep up with their age peers in school. Although the rate at which youth with disabilities were at the typical grade level for their age increased dramatically, almost half of them continued to be older for their grade, either because they were not ready to start school with their age peers or because they had been retained at grade level for poor performance at some time in their school careers. A small, but significant, decline in parents' reports of youth's abilities to perform functional mental skills, such as reading common signs and counting change, also raises concern about the academic skills being acquired by youth with disabilities. These findings point to the continuing challenges schools face in developing educational programs for youth with disabilities that will maximize their chances of progressing through school at a typical pace.

Challenging behaviors may have been increasing among some youth with disabilities. There was a significant increase over time in the rate at which youth with disabilities demonstrated behaviors that had resulted at some time in them being suspended or expelled from school, fired from a job, or arrested. This increase occurred almost entirely among youth with emotional disturbances or other health impairments. Both groups of youth had experienced significant increases in receipt of mental health services, which may have addressed some of their behavioral issues, but clearly did not fully ameliorate their tendency to act in ways that resulted in negative sanctions by schools, employers, or society.

This first look at changes over time in the population of high-school-age youth with disabilities shows mixed results. Significant progress has been made in important areas, but work remains to be done in more fully realizing the vision of improved results for children and youth with disabilities. Additional analyses in the coming year of differences in the school experiences between high school students with disabilities at the time of NLTS and those represented by NLTS2 will shed additional light on both the accomplishments and remaining challenges they face.