

1. INTRODUCTION

By Mary Wagner and Camille Marder

In 1975, the United States Congress passed landmark legislation that has affected the lives of children and youth with disabilities and their families in countless and far-reaching ways. P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), was pivotal in moving children and youth with disabilities into the mainstream of public education so that they are better able to achieve their full potential.

By 1983, a large number of students with disabilities had experienced much of their school careers under the provisions of EHA and were facing the transition from high school to young adulthood. A concern for the obstacles facing youth with disabilities in making this transition successfully had projected transition issues, service provision, and research into the policy spotlight at the federal, state, and local levels (Will, 1984). In response, Congress mandated that the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education conduct a longitudinal study of secondary school students with disabilities in transition to adulthood, which would paint a national picture of their experiences.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (NLTS), conducted by SRI International for OSEP from 1984 through 1993, was a response to that mandate. Findings from NLTS were used by many audiences for a variety of purposes, including shaping the evolution of federal special education policy through various amendments to EHA, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA underwent significant revision in 1997 in the process of congressional reauthorization. The ensuing Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (P.L. 105-17) was an effort to build on the “significant progress” under earlier legislation “by:

- Raising expectations for children with disabilities;
- Increasing parental involvement in the education of their children;
- Ensuring that regular education teachers are involved in planning and assessing children’s progress;
- Including children with disabilities in assessments, performance goals, and reports to the public;
- Supporting quality professional development for all personnel who are involved in educating children with disabilities.” (U.S. Department of Education, 1997)

IDEA ’97 also stresses the importance of solid information about the experiences and achievements of children and youth with disabilities as a foundation for improving practice and accountability within schools. The legislation authorizes the “production of new knowledge” [Sec. 672(b)(1)] through a variety of federal activities, including “producing information on the long-term impact of early intervention and education on results for individuals with disabilities through large-scale longitudinal studies” [Sec. 672(b)(2)(H)].

In carrying out the responsibility for producing this new information, OSEP is building on the foundation of NLTS and implementing a portfolio of longitudinal studies that span the age range of children and youth, enabling the studies to address the critical question of how experiences of children and youth shape their later achievements. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) is a part of that portfolio. It focuses on the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of secondary-school-age youth with disabilities nationally. Over a 10-year period, the study will document multiple dimensions of the experiences and achievements of those youth as they transition to early adulthood.

This document is one of a series of reports of findings from NLTS2 that will emerge over the next several years. It presents information gathered from parents and guardians¹ of NLTS2 students through telephone interviews and a mail survey conducted in 2001.

An Overview of NLTS2

Information from NLTS2 represents youth with disabilities nationally. The more than 11,000 students who were selected and eligible for the NLTS2 sample represent all students who were ages 13 through 16 on December 1, 2000, were receiving special education, and were in at least seventh grade. In selecting students, NLTS2 first stratified all districts within the United States by geographic region, student enrollment, and the poverty level of the student population. A random sample of districts was selected from the strata; invitations to participate also were sent to all state-supported special schools serving students with disabilities. Rosters of all students receiving special education in the NLTS2 age range were requested from all sampled districts. Students then were selected randomly from each disability category. Students with less common disabilities were oversampled to achieve sufficient sample sizes for analyses. A total of 11,276 students were in the initial eligible NLTS2 sample. (See Appendix A for a discussion of the design of NLTS2, including a more complete description of the sample and how it was selected.)

Findings represent the national population of youth with disabilities as a whole and youth in each of 12 federal special education disability categories. Past research has shown that youth with disabilities differ from youth in the general population in important ways, and that they differ from each other just as significantly on many dimensions (see, for example, Wagner, Marder, & Blackorby, 2002; Wagner et al., 1991). For example, youth with visual impairments have markedly different experiences than do youth with mental retardation in school and in their postschool years (Wagner, 1993; Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992). A key value of NLTS2 is its ability to depict these important disability-related differences by presenting findings that represent all youth in each disability category nationally.

Another extremely valuable aspect of NLTS2 is its longitudinal design. The teenage years and early twenties are a time of enormous physical, psychological, social, and emotional change. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is influenced by myriad factors, including family characteristics and expectations; community norms and resources; evolving peer and familial relationships; and crucial educational, vocational, and personal choices. NLTS2 is documenting the changes that take place during this important developmental stage and identifying early experiences that contribute to more positive results as youth with disabilities age, progress in school, and chart a course into early adulthood.

¹ For simplicity, parents and guardians are referred to here as parents.

NLTS2 brings to bear information that represents the perspectives of parents, schools, and youth themselves on a wide range of topics. The study’s conceptual framework (Exhibit 1-1) shows the comprehensive array of issues about which NLTS2 is providing information. Reporting on the characteristics of youth and their households is a fundamental step in a progression of analyses and reports that will go on to depict youth’s secondary school programs and services. Among the key issues that are being addressed regarding secondary education are youth’s access to the general education curriculum, transition planning, course-taking, standardized testing, and employment-related services. NLTS2 also is examining the experiences of youth outside of school, including their involvement in friendships and social activities, the labor market, risk behaviors and the criminal justice system, and marriage and family formation (Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder, 2003). Postsecondary education and adult services and their contributions to employment and financial independence also will be addressed as youth enter adulthood. The achievements of youth in and out of school will be of crucial concern, as will identifying the aspects of youth, households, school programs, adult services, and nonschool experiences that contribute to more positive results for youth as they age.

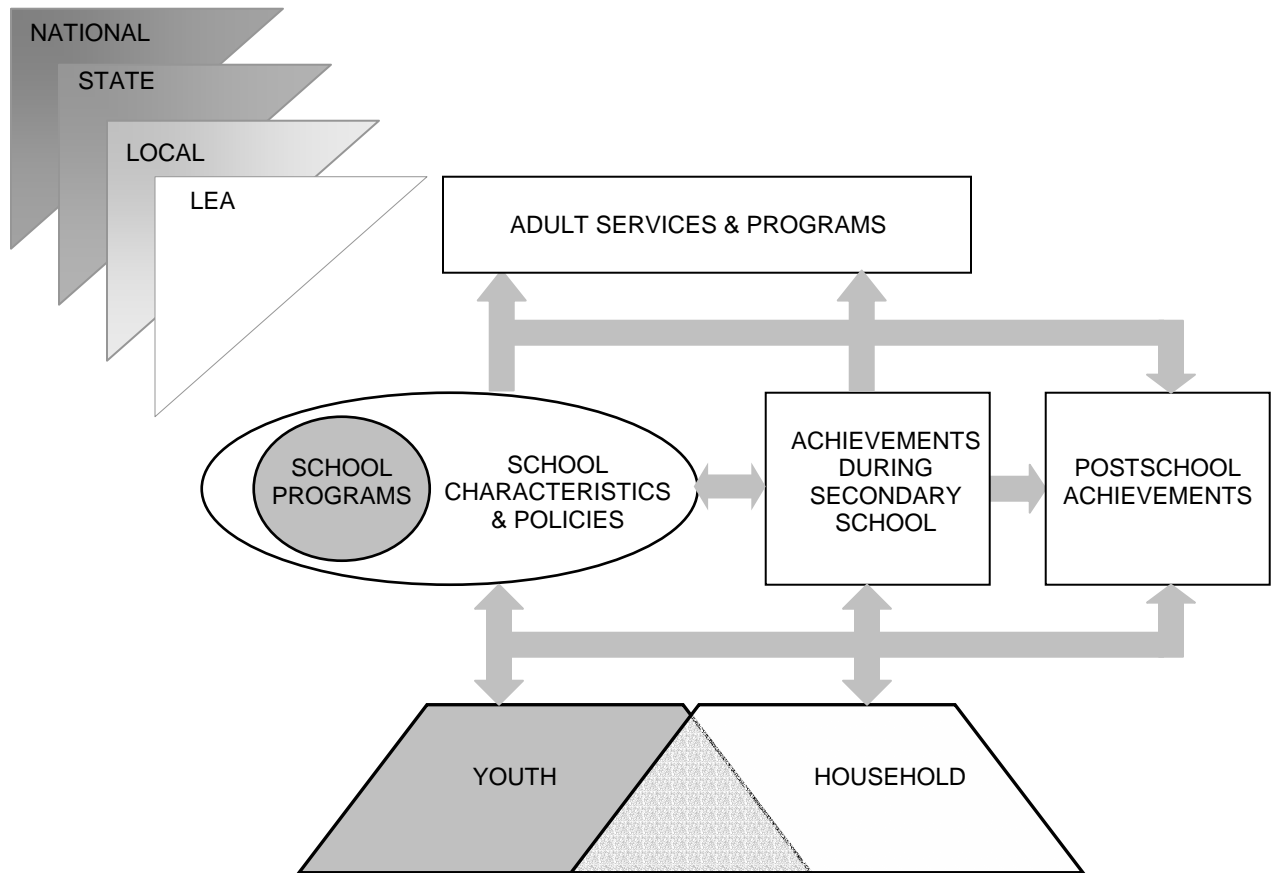


Exhibit 1-1
NLTS2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To support this ambitious analysis agenda, NLTS2 includes five waves of data collection. The first wave of interviews and surveys with parents was conducted in 2001. Additional waves will be conducted with the same parents in 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009. Youth who are able to respond to telephone interview questions also will be interviewed in those years; those who cannot respond to questions by phone but can provide information about themselves will be sent questionnaires by mail. Direct assessments of students' academic performance in reading and mathematics and their content knowledge in science and social studies, as well as student interviews assessing their self-concept and self-determination skills, will be conducted once for each youth when he or she is 16 or 17. School staff surveys that capture important aspects of students' schools and individual educational programs were conducted in spring 2002 and will be repeated in 2004 for youth who still are in secondary school at that time. High school transcripts (or course summary forms for students who do not have transcripts) will be collected to document students' secondary school course-taking and performance.

NLTS2 is designed so that much of its data will be comparable to data collected by the original NLTS. Thus, in addition to painting a detailed picture of youth with disabilities today, NLTS2 will show how secondary school special education and the transition process have changed in the decade and a half since NLTS. The rich, wide-ranging view of youth with disabilities as they transition to adulthood provided by NLTS2 will support informed policy-making and improved practice for youth with disabilities.

Focus of This Report

This report examines the individual characteristics of youth with disabilities and the households in which they are being raised. Understanding youth's individual characteristics is a crucial foundation for serving them well. Youth approach their educational experiences from a complex history and background that is shaped by demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity; by family background and circumstances, such as parents' education, expectations, and household economic status; and, importantly, by the nature of their disabilities and how well they function in a variety of domains. All of these factors help structure the involvement of youth at home, at school, and in the community. Thus, they are essential elements of the context for many major life experiences of youth. In important ways, an understanding of that context will inform an understanding and interpretation of their experiences.

This look at youth with disabilities addresses the following questions:

- What are the demographic characteristics of youth?
- What are the characteristics of their households?
- What are their identified disabilities and treatment histories?
- What are their functional abilities in the physical, sensory, communication, social, and independence domains?
- What aptitudes do youth bring to the educational process?
- How do these factors differ for youth with different characteristics and from those of youth in the general population?

Findings that address these questions are presented in several ways. First, the means of continuous variables (e.g., the average age of youth) or the overall frequency distributions of categorical variables (e.g., the percentage of youth living with both parents) are presented. Then the distribution of each item is presented for important subgroups of youth, including those who differ in their primary disability category and in key demographic characteristics.

When interpreting findings presented in this report, readers should remember the following issues:

- **Findings in this report represent the national population of students with disabilities.** All of the descriptive statistics presented in this report are weighted to represent the national population of students with disabilities in the NLTS2 age range, as well as youth in each disability category individually.
- **Standard errors indicate the precision of the statistical estimates.** For each mean or percentage in this report, a standard error is presented (usually in parentheses). The standard error indicates the precision of the estimate; for example, having a standard error of 2 for a variable with a weighted estimated value of 50% means that the value for the total population, if it had been measured, would lie between 48% and 52% (i.e., plus or minus 2 percentage points of 50%) 95 times out of 100. Thus, small standard errors allow for greater confidence to be placed in the estimate, whereas larger ones require caution.
- **Small sample sizes tend to lower the precision of statistical estimates.** Although NLTS2 data are weighted to represent the population, the precision of estimates can be influenced heavily by the actual number of youth in a given group (e.g., disability category or racial/ethnic group). This influence is shown by differences in the sizes of standard errors. For example, NLTS2's sample includes relatively few youth with deaf-blindness (n=156), so estimates for that group have relatively large standard errors. Therefore, the reader should be cautious in interpreting results for this group and others with small sample sizes.

Organization of This Report

Chapter 2 presents information on the disability classifications and demographic characteristics of youth with disabilities. Chapter 3 presents information about the households in which youth live, including household composition, parents' education and employment, and socioeconomic status. This parent-reported information illustrates important ways in which youth with disabilities are both similar to and different from their peers in the general population, as well as ways that they differ from each other.

Chapter 4 identifies the nature of the disabilities experienced by youth, the ages at which youth were identified as having disabilities and began to receive services for them, and several aspects of youth's experiences with service programs, as reported by parents. Chapter 5 delves into the health and functional skills of youth in the physical, sensory, and communication domains. Youth's daily living skills, social skills, and aptitudes are considered in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 summarizes key findings. Appendix A describes methodological issues related to the study design, sample, and analysis procedures; Appendix B lists unweighted sample sizes for the exhibits in the report.