

November 2004



NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL  
TRANSITION STUDY **2**

# TRANSITION PLANNING FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A Special Topic Report of Findings from the National  
Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)

**Final Review Draft**

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Office of Special Education Programs  
U.S. Department of Education

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**SRI Project P11182**

NLTS2 has been funded with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, under contract number ED-01-CO-0003. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In its 1997 reauthorization, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) acknowledged that a primary purpose of the free appropriate public education guaranteed to children and youth with disabilities is to “prepare them for employment and independent living” [IDEA '97 Final Regulations, Section 300.1(a)]. Requirements were added in IDEA '97 to include transition planning in the individualized education programs (IEPs) of all secondary school students with disabilities beginning at age 14 (or earlier, if appropriate) in an effort to prepare them for the challenges of adulthood. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education is working to provide the information needed to improve the transition and postschool outcomes of secondary school students with disabilities, in part through the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). The findings of this 10-year study generalize to youth with disabilities nationally and to youth in each of the 12 federal special education disability categories in use for students in the NLTS2 age range.

This report examines efforts to prepare youth with disabilities for the transition from secondary school to adulthood. It highlights the transition planning process undertaken during high school with and for youth with disabilities as they prepare for life after school, specifically addressing the following topics:

- Age of students at initiation of transition planning
- Students' transition goals
- Participants in transition planning
- Planned courses of study and instruction in transition planning
- Identification of needed postschool services
- Schools' contacts with agencies and organizations on behalf of transitioning students
- Postschool service information provided to parents
- Perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the suitability and usefulness of the transition planning process.

These topics are addressed by using data from two important sources:

- Parents or guardians of NLTS2 study members provided input in telephone interviews and mail surveys conducted in spring and summer of 2001. They provided information about their participation and satisfaction with the transition planning process.
- School staff best able to describe students' overall programs were surveyed by mail in spring of the 2001-02 school year. They described the transition planning process.

From these data, NLTS2 provides a national picture of transition planning, including variations in that planning for students who differ in disability and other characteristics. Four main themes about the transition planning process emerge from this national picture:

- The extent to which parents' and students' expectations for the transition planning process are being met varies among secondary-school-age students with disabilities.

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- Transition planning evolves as students progress through their high school years.
- Transition planning reflects the diversity of students' needs and abilities.
- The transition planning process differs for students with different household incomes and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

## **A Mixed Picture of Transition Planning**

NLTS2 findings demonstrate that the basic requirement for transition planning is being met for many students with disabilities. Almost 90% of secondary school students receiving special education services have transition planning under way on their behalf, with about two-thirds having begun the process by age 14 as required by IDEA '97. Furthermore, school staff report that about three-fourths of students, regardless of age, have a course of study identified that is intended to help them achieve their transition goals.

**Participants in transition planning.** The vast majority of students and their parents participate in transition planning.

- Among the 85% of parents participating in the transition planning process, two-thirds report being satisfied with their level of participation.
- School staff report that about 70% of students with transition plans participate actively in the planning by providing input (58%) or taking a leadership role (12%). Yet about 6% of secondary school students with disabilities reportedly do not attend IEP or transition planning meetings, and 15% have parents who do not attend.

About one-third of participating parents report that the IEP and transition planning processes for their children do not provide as much opportunity for their involvement in decisions as they would like. Further, although the partnership between families and schools in setting goals for students is a reality for about one-third of students, parents report that the school mostly decides students' goals for almost half of students, and mostly parents and youth set goals for one in five students. Despite the intention that families, schools, and other organizations collaborate in the process, according to school personnel, transition planning involves primarily families and school staff; representatives of outside organizations participate actively in students' transition planning only infrequently. Overall 14% of students have the participation of a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselor and 17% have the involvement of a representative from any other outside organization in their transition planning.

**Students' goals.** Students' transition goals heavily emphasize employment and postsecondary education, and the transition planning process appropriately reflects these emphases. According to school staff:

- Postsecondary education accommodations are identified as postschool service needs for about half of youth, and vocational training or employment services are needs identified for more than one-third.
- Contacts with outside organizations as part of the transition planning process are made primarily with postsecondary education institutions and employers or vocational training programs.

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**Supports for transition.** Regardless of who participates in the transition planning process and the contacts made on students' behalf, the process will be effective only if students' school programs help them achieve their transition goals. According to school staff:

- Approximately three-fourths of students have IEPs that specify a course of study that is intended to help them meet their transition goals, and about 80% have programs that are at least fairly well suited to meet their transition goals.
- However, nearly 20% of secondary school students with disabilities have programs that are only somewhat well suited or not at all well suited to meet their transition goals.

Providing information about postschool service options to parents is an important part of the school's role in bridging the gap between school and adult services for students with disabilities. NLTS2 found that school staff report providing information about postschool services and programs to parents of three-fourths of students who are 17 and 18 years old, leaving one in four parents of youth this age without this information.

### **The Transition Planning Process Develops over Time**

Transition planning is not a uniform experience for students as they age; indeed, several aspects of the process are different for older students. Some of the differences, such as the role youth take in the process, may occur because of the increased maturity that comes with age. Other differences may reflect an increasing sense of urgency on everyone's part as high school exit approaches.

**Initial transition planning.** The mean age for the initiation of transition planning is 14.4 years. Three-fourths of 14-year-olds have had transition planning started, and the process is increasingly likely to occur for older students. By the time students are 17 or 18 years old, 96% have had transition planning, reflecting a 20-percentage-point increase over 14-year-olds.

**Participants in transition planning.** Older students appear to exhibit greater responsibility for postschool goals relative to younger students, which may partly explain their greater likelihood of participating actively in transition planning. School staff reported on the types of participants taking part in the transition planning process.

- One-third of 14-year-old students with disabilities are present for transition planning but do not participate—a passive role taken by only one-fifth of 17- and 18-year-olds.
- Providing active input into planning increases for older students, with more than 60% of 17- and 18-year-olds providing input, compared with 45% of younger students.
- Student leadership of the transition planning process also is more likely among older students; more than 15% of 17- and 18-year olds take this role.

Although the participation of parents (85%), special education teachers (97%), and general education teachers (59%) varies little for students across the age range, the participation of a general education vocational teacher in transition planning is greater for older students; this difference reflects the increased likelihood of older students' taking vocational education courses and the approach of students' transition to postsecondary vocational training and employment. About 40% of 17- and 18-year-old students have a general education vocational teacher involved in their transition planning, twice as many as among 14-year-olds.

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Consistent with the increasing emphasis on vocational goals and services for older students, the participation of a state vocational rehabilitation counselor is more common for these students. One in four 17- and 18-year-old students have such an individual involved in their transition planning, compared with one in ten 14-year-olds. Similarly, the active participation of representatives from a variety of other outside organizations increases as early adulthood approaches from one in ten 15-year-olds to one in five 17- and 18-year-old students.

**Supports for transition.** Instruction focused specifically on transition planning (e.g., a specialized curriculum designed to help students assess options and develop strategies for leaving secondary school and transitioning to adult life) is one way to help students reach their goals. According to school staff, 64% of students have received such instruction, older students (76% for 17- and 18-year-olds) are more likely than younger students (48% for 14-year-olds) to have had it.

Generally, more post-high-school service needs are identified as part of transition planning as students approach the transition to adult service systems, according to school staff report. Most notably, vocational training and employment service needs are more commonly identified for older students than for younger students. Parents of older students are more likely to receive information from the schools about adult services, and school contacts with many kinds of outside organizations on behalf of students with disabilities intensify as school exit nears.

### **Transition Planning Reflects a Diversity of Needs and Abilities**

The goals and needs specified in students' transition plans, the participants in the planning process, and many transition-related activities differ markedly across the disability categories. School staff provided information on the following aspects of students' transition plans.

**Students' goals.** Students with disabilities have multiple goals that reflect their future plans. That the various transition goals are shared by some students in all disability categories masks a large range across categories in the percentages of students who have each goal. For example:

- Although about half of students with disabilities overall plan to go to college, that plan varies from 10% of students with mental retardation to more than 70% of students with visual impairments.
- Postsecondary vocational training is planned for about 40% of students with disabilities overall; however, almost 60% of students with other health impairments have this goal, compared with about 20% of students with visual impairments.
- Supported employment is the transition goal for fewer than 10% of students with disabilities overall, but it is the goal of almost 40% of students with autism.

**Supports for transition.** The percentages of students for whom a variety of supports are in place (i.e., a course of study students should pursue to meet their transition goals, instruction focused on transition planning skills, and a list of postschool service needs consistent with students' goals) vary with students' disability category.

- Specification of the students' course of study in the IEP relative to transition goals varies from 65% of students with hearing impairments to 75% of students with learning disabilities.

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- Instruction for transition planning designed to assist students in assessing their options and developing strategies for transition is received by 55% to 70% of students across categories. Students with autism or multiple disabilities are the most likely to receive this type of instruction; students with other health impairments are the least likely to do so.

Students' transition plans also identify a wide range of service and program needs for the post-high-school period.

- The transition plans for students with learning disabilities or hearing, orthopedic, or other health impairments are the most likely to specify postsecondary education accommodations.
- The plans for students with autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness typically specify a constellation of postschool services, including vocational training, supported living arrangements, and behavioral interventions, as well as transportation, social work, mental health, and communication services.
- The plans for students with emotional disturbances are very likely to specify behavioral interventions and mental health services.
- For students with specific sensory or physical disabilities, the plans typically suggest corresponding services such as, audiology, vision and mobility services, occupational, or physical therapy.

The types of organizations that schools contact regarding programs or employment for students when they leave high school reflect both the students' postschool goals and identified needs. Schools typically make more contacts for students in the disability categories that have more identified needs. Schools also are more likely to provide parents of students in the disability categories that have multiple identified service needs with information about appropriate services than parents of students in disability categories with fewer identified needs.

**Perceptions of the processes.** Parents and school staff of students in each disability category hold a range of views regarding transition planning and the school programs designed to meet students' transition goals. For example:

- School staff report that more than half of students with visual impairments have programs that are very well suited to help them achieve their transition goals, whereas only one-third of students with emotional disturbances have such highly rated school programs.
- More than 4 in 10 students with mental retardation or visual impairments have parents who report that the transition planning process is very useful, although less than 3 in 10 students with autism have parents who fell this way.
- Parents report that one in four students with emotional disturbances or other health impairments have transition plans that are not very or not at all useful for their children, compared to 1 in 12 students with mental retardation whose parents report limited usefulness of transition planning.

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## The Transition Planning Process Reflects Income and Racial/Ethnic Differences

The characteristics of the transition planning process that are associated with students' demographic characteristics are limited largely to some transition goals, parents' and youth's participation in the transition planning process, and parents' perceptions of that process.

**Students' goals.** Information on students' goals was provided by school staff. These data indicate that household income is strongly associated with the likelihood of students' having a transition goal of attending a 2- or 4-year college. Consistent with this finding, students from upper-income households are more likely than those from lower-income households to plan on attending a college or university, have postsecondary education accommodations identified as part of transition planning, and have schools make contacts with colleges and universities on their behalf. Larger proportions of African-American students than of their white peers have independent living or enhancement of social/interpersonal relationships as transition goals.

**Participants in transition planning.** In other data provided by school staff, household income and racial/ethnic differences are strongly associated with the participation of parents in the transition planning process.

- Students in the lowest household income group are less likely than those from the highest-income households to have parents who participate actively in transition planning.
- African-American students are less likely than white students to have parents who take part in transition planning.

Parents reported on their satisfaction with their level of involvement in the transition planning process and how useful they perceive that process to be. An interesting relationship exists between their satisfaction with involvement and perceptions of usefulness. The parents of students from culturally diverse backgrounds and from low-income households tend to be less satisfied with their level of involvement, but are more likely to perceive the transition planning process as useful, compared with parents of white students and those from more affluent families. Perhaps the lower level of involvement of these parents is not a reflection of the value they place on the process but more an indicator of their availability to participate, their comfort with school staff or procedures, or cultural influences.

School staff report more passive participation by African-American students, who also assume leadership roles less frequently than do their white or Hispanic peers.

It is encouraging to note that no differences exist between income or racial/ethnic groups regarding the participation of school staff or vocational rehabilitation counselors in the transition planning process. On the other hand, participants in transition planning from outside organizations (other than vocational rehabilitation) are more likely to be involved with planning for students from low-income households.

The information presented in this report is only the first step in the exploration of transition planning and its effects using NLTS2 data. Later reports will address the question of whether or not differences in students' transition planning relate to their achievements in postsecondary education, employment, and independence during early adulthood.

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