

## **7. FAMILIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

This report provides the first national picture of the involvement of families of secondary-school-age students with disabilities in their children's educational development. Family involvement has been defined in multiple ways (Grolnick et al., 1997; Jordan et al., 2002), but current consensus is that family involvement is a multifaceted construct (Fan & Chen, 2001; Mutua & Dimitrov, 2001; Rosenzweig, 2001; Simon & Epstein, 2001). This may be true especially for families of students with disabilities, where involvement frequently goes beyond the traditional measures, such as helping with homework or attending school events, to involvement as advocates, liaisons, and case managers (Berger, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Across the multiple ways family involvement has been defined, the one constant is the consensus that it is an important contributor to student outcomes, both for students in the general population and for those in special education.

The NLTS2 analyses reported here focus on three aspects of family involvement: involvement at home, specifically helping with homework and talking about school; involvement at school, specifically family participation in general school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school or class events, and volunteering at school; and involvement in IEP meetings. This report provides a benchmark for comparing the involvement of families of students with disabilities in special education with that of families in the general population.

This chapter presents key themes from the analyses documented in this report and discusses some of their implications for special education practice.

### **Key Themes**

#### ***Highly Involved Families***

Families of secondary-school-age students with disabilities are actively involved in supporting their children's educational development, both at home and at school. Most families report regularly talking with their children about school and helping with homework at least once a week, with almost one in five providing homework assistance as often as five or more times per week. Families also participate in a wide range of school-based activities, including attending schoolwide meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school and class events, and, to a lesser extent, volunteering at school. In addition, most parents of students with disabilities report having participated in at least one IEP meeting in the current or prior school year.

Not all parents are equally involved in the education-related activities measured by NLTS2—family involvement in these activities does vary by disability category. Families of students with emotional disturbances are less likely than other families to help with homework. They, along with families of students with mental retardation, are among the least likely to participate in school meetings, events, and volunteering, although parents of students in both disability categories are among the most likely to attend parent-teacher conferences.

It is important to be aware that disability category differences often are compounded by other youth and family characteristics. For example, students with emotional disturbances and students with mental retardation are more likely than other youth with disabilities to live in single-parent households, to be in poverty, and to be among the least likely to be involved in

extracurricular activities at their schools (Wagner, Cadwallader, et al., 2003; Wagner, Marder, Levine, et al., 2003). Analyses presented in Chapter 4 found these characteristics—lower family income, single-parent families, and student nonparticipation in extracurricular activities—to be related to lower levels of family involvement. Clearly, reasons for varying levels of involvement are many, above and beyond disability category.

### ***More Involved Than Other Families***

Compared with their peers in the general population, families of students with disabilities are more involved in monitoring and assisting with homework, and they are as involved, and at times more involved, in school-based activities. The difference in homework support is especially striking for those who help with homework frequently; youth with disabilities are much more likely to receive homework assistance frequently than are their peers in the general population. Families of students with disabilities also are more likely to attend general school meetings and parent-teacher conferences than those in the general population.

These findings raise the question of why parents of youth with disabilities are helping their children with homework so much more than other parents, particularly when considering the family demographics of the two groups. Having two-parent families, higher household incomes, and higher parent educational levels have long been associated with higher levels of family involvement in the general population (Coleman, 1987; Gavidia-Payne & Stoneman, 1997; Lareau, 1987; Nord & West, 2001; Peng & Lee, 1992). However, families of students with disabilities are less likely to have any of these characteristics; in fact, they are more likely than other families to have single-parent households, have lower family incomes, and not have a parent who has attended postsecondary school (Wagner, Marder, Levine, et al., 2003; Wagner, et al., 2002).

Parents of students with disabilities may be helping with homework more than other families because of their children's additional homework needs. Often, students with disabilities have more problems with homework than do their peers in the general population (Berger, 2000; Gajria & Salend, 1995; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Some families of students with disabilities are used to providing support in many other aspects of their children's lives, so involvement in education-related activities may be a natural extension of that relationship. Families also may be helping with homework because they may feel that schools are not meeting students' needs fully. NLTS2 findings presented in Chapter 4 indicate that families who spend more time helping with homework tend to be less satisfied with their children's schools. There probably are many reasons, which can be explored in future research, why families of students with disabilities are more involved than other families.

### ***Similarities between Families of Students with Disabilities and Other Families***

Despite demographic differences and the fact that families of students with disabilities frequently deal with issues unique to parenting students with disabilities, including participating in the IEP process, families of students with disabilities are very much like other families in many ways. For example, families of students with disabilities are similar to peers in the general population in that homework is one of the activities most often necessitating a partnership between families, students, and schools.

In addition, the relationships between the characteristics of families of youth with disabilities and levels of involvement mirror those of families in the general population. Youth

behavior, abilities, and demographics are related to family involvement in much the same way for students with disabilities and students in the general population. For both groups, students who have weaker cognitive abilities are more likely to receive homework assistance. Students whose behavior is described as being more difficult are less likely to have families involved in their education at home and at school. Older students with disabilities and their peers in the general population have parents who tend to be less involved than parents of younger students. Girls in secondary school are more likely than boys to have parents who are involved at home and at school. African-American students with disabilities, as well as their peers in the general population, are more likely than white students to receive help with educational activities at home and are less likely to have families who are involved at school, holding constant other differences.

Household characteristics also are related to involvement in education for both families of youth with disabilities and youth in the general population. For both groups, wealthier families, families with two parents, families with better-educated parents, and families who have social supports are more likely to be involved in their children's education, when other factors are held constant.

### ***High Expectations for the Future***

A large majority of students with disabilities have parents who expect them to succeed in the future in many aspects of education and independence. Most are expected to graduate from high school with a regular diploma, get a paid job, achieve financial independence, and live independently. Parents of students with disabilities are more optimistic about the future employment and 2-year college enrollment outlook for their children than they were in 1987, although fewer than two-thirds currently are expected to continue on to any type of postsecondary education.

As with most aspects of youth's experiences, these expectations are not shared equally for all youth with disabilities. Lower expectations are particularly common for youth with mental retardation, autism, or multiple disabilities, and for those from lower-income households.

### ***Involvement Is Important***

Parent involvement and expectations for the future are related to students' achievements. Even taking into account the relationship between students' level of functioning and parent expectations, youth whose parents expect them to go on to postsecondary education are more engaged in their classes, receive better grades, are closer to grade level in their tested reading and math abilities, and are more likely to affiliate with organized groups and avoid disciplinary actions than are those whose parents are not as optimistic.

Similar to the experiences of their peers in the general population, youth with disabilities whose families are more involved in their schools benefit from that support. Family involvement in their children's education at school is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including better grades, stronger reading skills, more involvement in organized groups, more individual friendships, and higher rates of employment.

## **Implications**

These findings have implications for special education practice, especially related to family-school communication, information and support, and teacher training.

Whereas strong family involvement clearly is important to the success of youth with disabilities, this type of involvement also can be challenging. Parent-child interactions about homework may be stressful for both parents and students, especially if parents feel they don't have the necessary knowledge and information to help effectively (Bauer & Shea, 2003; Baumgartner, et al., 1993). Helping with homework at the secondary-school level can be particularly daunting when students take more complex courses, such as geometry or chemistry, which may explain in part why homework assistance is lower among families of older students.

Parents need information and guidance to support them in their involvement in their children's educational development. They need information about how and when to help with homework and how best to support their children's academic work. Parents can receive this information through regular communication with teachers regarding topics such as material covered in class, how homework should be completed, and teacher expectations for adequate performance, yet researchers have found that fewer than half of schools report offering parents weekly or monthly information about curriculum or instruction (Schiller et al., 2003).

The IEP process places demands on parents beyond what often is expected in other types of family-school partnerships. Although most families report attending their children's IEP meeting, more than one-third want to be more involved in IEP decision-making. Schools can use a number of strategies to support active parental involvement in IEP meetings, including providing parents with a draft of the IEP to review before the meeting, yet fewer than half the schools report offering parents this type of information (Schiller et al., 2003).

To better support families' involvement in their children's education, schools need to expand the strategies they are using. NLTS2 findings highlight the need for schools and teachers to broaden their focus from programs that bring parents to the school building to programs that support family involvement at home and that expand family expectations, both of which NLTS2 analyses have found to be strongly related to student outcomes.

In addition, preservice and inservice teacher preparation should include components on parent involvement. Teachers' actions can have a strong impact on family involvement. Researchers have found that families who receive prompting and invitations for involvement from teachers are more likely to be involved in homework and school-based activities (Ames et al., 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This form of targeted outreach may be particularly necessary for parents of students with emotional disturbances or mental retardation, along with additional efforts to include these children in school-based events and activities that bring families to schools. Further, it is important for schools and teachers to be aware of differences among families. Families who are spending the most time helping with homework, such as African-American families, often are those who are not coming to the school building. These families could benefit from creative outreach and support in their involvement at home.

Schools are not the only sources of information and support for families. OSEP-supported trainings and other types of trainings and programs provide parents with much-needed information about how to monitor their children's progress, be productive members of the IEP team, and support their children's education at school. Other factors being equal, families who attend OSEP-supported trainings or other types of trainings are more likely to be involved at school and to attend IEP meetings.

Parent-to-parent programs and support groups also can be particularly effective in providing informational, emotional, and motivational support to families of children with disabilities. Belonging to these groups is positively associated with family involvement both at home and at

school. Other research has found that only one-quarter of schools offer support or parent groups to families of students with disabilities (Schiller et al., 2003). NLTS2 findings point to the importance of providing a forum for parents to share their thoughts and feelings and a place to receive information, support, and encouragement from others who understand what they are experiencing.

Support and information will become particularly important for families of youth with disabilities during their children's transition from secondary school to adult life, when the focus on participation shifts from involvement in school-related activities to involvement with services, postsecondary schools, and the workplace. Many families will need to continue to assist their children beyond the secondary school years, often by acting as a case manager. When youth with disabilities are in secondary school, their services usually are coordinated by school staff (Levine, Marder, & Wagner, 2004). Once students leave the school system, many parents will need to assume this role (Salembier & Furney, 1997). When NLTS2 families are asked about barriers to getting services for their children, the most frequently cited barrier is a lack of information about available services (Levine et al., 2004). Getting timely and accurate information about adult services, postsecondary opportunities, or vocational assistance will be critical to these families' ability to navigate a smooth transition from school to postschool life.

This report describes families' involvement at home and at school in support of their children's education during the secondary school years. Longitudinal analyses in subsequent waves of NLTS2 will shed light on how parent roles unfold over a period of years and how family involvement affects later outcomes as youth with disabilities transition from school to early adult life.