

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has brought an increased awareness of the importance of family-school connections by focusing on the integral role parents play in assisting their children's learning, encouraging parents to be actively involved in their children's education, and including, for the first time in the history of federal education legislation, a specific statutory definition of parent involvement.

The evidence is persuasive and consistent that families play a critical role in nurturing their children's educational growth. Family support for learning is important for all students, but it may be particularly important for children with disabilities. One of the main tenets of IDEA, as amended in 1997 (IDEA '97), is parents' participation in decision-making related to their children's education. However, despite legislative support for parental involvement, little information has been available until now to examine the actual level of family support for education that is given to middle- and high-school-age students with disabilities.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) provides the first national picture of the involvement of families in the educational development of their secondary-school-age children with disabilities. NLTS2 is one component of a portfolio of longitudinal studies that span the age range of children and youth with disabilities. These studies are sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education in response to requirements of IDEA '97. NLTS2 is a rich source of information on the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of youth with disabilities who were ages 13 through 16 and receiving special education services in grade 7 or above when they were sampled in 2000. Information is being collected about these youth five times during this 10-year study, from parents, school staff, and the youth themselves, as they transition from secondary school to early adulthood. Findings from this nationally representative sample 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 considers the following questions for secondary-school-age students with disabilities receiving special education:

- ◆ To what extent do families of secondary-school-age students with disabilities engage in activities at home and at school that support their children's educational development? How does this level of involvement compare with that of families in the general population?
- ◆ What are the relationships between student and family characteristics and levels of family involvement? How do these relationships compare with those of families in the general population?
- ◆ What are families' expectations for their children's future education and independence?
- ◆ To what extent do differences in levels of family involvement and family expectations relate to variations in students' school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence?

This is the Executive Summary of Newman, L. (2004). *Family Involvement in the Educational Development of Youth with Disabilities. A Special Topic Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

These questions are addressed primarily by using data collected from parents or guardians of NLTS2 study members during spring and summer of 2001. Parents provide their unique perspective on their children's schools, programs, and future attainments, as well as on their own participation in their children's education at home and at school. Telephone interviews addressed these important topics; mail questionnaires were administered to parents who could not be reached by phone. Information collected from staff of schools attended by students with disabilities in the 2001-02 school year also is used in identifying variations in students' achievements related to differences in levels of family involvement.

Highlights of the information NLTS2 obtained from these sources are presented below.

Involvement at Home

Families of most students with disabilities are very involved in supporting their children's educational development at home.

- ❖ Most families report regularly talking with their children about school and helping with homework at least once a week.
- ❖ One in five provide homework assistance as often as five or more times per week.
- ❖ Students with disabilities are more likely to receive help with homework than are their peers in the general population.
- ❖ The difference in homework support is especially apparent for those who receive frequent help; students with disabilities are five times as likely as their peers in the general population to receive homework assistance frequently.
- ❖ Family support for education at home varies across disability categories.
- ❖ Youth with emotional disturbances are among the least likely to receive help with homework.
- ❖ Students with multiple disabilities, autism, or orthopedic impairments receive the most frequent homework assistance.

Involvement at School and in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process

Many families of students with disabilities are involved at their children's schools, with almost all participating in at least one type of school-based activity.

- ❖ Families attend general school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school or class events, and, to a lesser extent, volunteer at school.
- ❖ Parents who participate in school-based activities are most frequently at the school for school or class events, such as science fairs, student performances, sports activities, and awards assemblies.
- ❖ Families of students with disabilities are as involved as their peers in the general population; and, for some types of school-based activities—general school meetings and parent-teacher conferences—they are more involved.

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- ❖ Nearly 9 out of 10 parents of secondary-school-age students with disabilities report participating in at least one IEP meeting in the current or prior school year.
- ❖ Slightly more than half of the families report being involved in developing IEP goals.
- ❖ About one-third want to be more involved in IEP decision-making.
- ❖ Family involvement in educational activities at school varies by disability category, with more variation in attending a school or class event or volunteering at school than in attending a general school meeting or an IEP meeting.
- ❖ Students with speech or orthopedic impairments have parents who consistently are among the most likely to participate in several types of school-based activities.
- ❖ Families of students with emotional disturbances or mental retardation are among the least likely to attend a general school meeting or a school or class event or to volunteer at the school, but are among those most likely to attend parent-teacher conferences.
- ❖ Families of students with other health impairments or traumatic brain injuries are among those most likely to attend IEP meetings.
- ❖ Families of students with mental retardation or speech impairments are among those least likely to attend IEP meetings.

Student and Family Characteristics Associated with Family Involvement

Several characteristics of students with disabilities are related to the participation of their families in their educational development, when controlling for other differences.

- ❖ Families of students experiencing problems in more domains and having lower functional cognitive skills are more likely to help with homework than families of students with fewer impairments.
- ❖ Negative youth behavior is related to lower levels of family involvement at school and at home.
- ❖ Involvement in home- and school-based activities is lower among families of older students with disabilities.
- ❖ Parents of daughters in secondary school are more likely than parents of sons to help with homework and to be involved at school.
- ❖ Neither student age nor gender is related to parent participation in the IEP process.
- ❖ Families of Hispanic students are less likely than families of white students to be involved in home-based education-related activities.
- ❖ African-American students have families who are more likely to be involved at home than their white peers but less likely to be involved at school and to attend IEP meetings.
- ❖ Students who attend their neighborhood school are more likely to have families who participate at the school and attend IEP meetings than are those who attend schools not located in their local area.

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- ❖ Families of students who are actively involved in extracurricular activities at school are more likely to participate in school-based activities.

In addition to the relationships between family involvement and student characteristics, levels of involvement also relate to characteristics of families themselves.

- ❖ Having more family resources—higher incomes or higher levels of parental educational attainment—is associated with higher levels of involvement of all kinds.
- ❖ Families with two parents in the household are more likely than single-parent families to be involved at home and at school.
- ❖ Having external supports is related to more frequent family participation. Those who belong to support groups for families of children with disabilities and those who participate in OSEP-supported or other types of training are more likely to support their children’s educational development.
- ❖ Families with higher expectations for their children’s postsecondary educational attainment are less likely to help with homework but are more likely to be involved at school than families of youth with disabilities who are less optimistic for their children’s continued education.
- ❖ The more satisfied families are with their children’s schools, the less likely they are to spend time on homework support.

Families of students who receive special education services frequently deal with issues unique to parenting these students, including participation in the IEP process. However, variations in levels of participation associated with differences in youth’s cognitive abilities, behavior, age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, mother’s educational attainment, number of parents and siblings in the household, and level of social support for families of students with disabilities parallel those of families of students in the general population.

Family Expectations

A majority of youth with disabilities, but not all, have parents who expect them to experience future success in many aspects of education and independence.

- ❖ Their parents expect that 85% or more “definitely” or “probably” will graduate from high school with a regular diploma and live independently.
- ❖ Although virtually all youth are expected to be able to find paid employment, fewer than two-thirds are expected to further their education after high school.
- ❖ More than four out of five youth are expected to achieve financial independence.
- ❖ Expectations regarding completing a 2-year college program and finding paid employment have increased for youth with disabilities since 1987, yet expectations for educational attainment lag behind those of youth in the general population.

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- ❖ Parents of about 15% of youth with disabilities do not expect them to receive a regular high school diploma or to live independently; nearly two out of five are not expected to pursue postsecondary education.

As with most aspects of youth's experiences, these expectations are not shared equally by all youth with disabilities.

- ❖ Lower expectations are particularly common for youth with mental retardation, autism, multiple disabilities, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, deaf-blindness.
- ❖ Expectations also generally are lower for youth with disabilities from lower-income households.

Relationship between Family Involvement and Student Achievements

The importance of family involvement and expectations is supported by NLTS2 analyses. Parents' activities in support of their children's education is associated with consistent differences in several achievement domains, independent of disability, functioning, or other differences among youth.

- ❖ Youth whose families are more involved in their schools are less far behind grade level in reading, tend to receive better grades, and have higher rates of involvement in organized groups (many of which are school based) and with individual friendships than youth with less family involvement at school.
- ❖ In the independence domain, youth whose families are more involved in their schools are more likely than youth from less-involved families to have had regular paid jobs in the preceding year.

In contrast, family support for education at home is not related to many outcomes, controlling for other differences among youth. One exception:

- ❖ Greater support for education at home is negatively associated with grades, possibly because parents are more likely to provide homework help to students who are doing poorly in school.

Expectations that parents hold for the futures of their children with disabilities in part reflect parents' experience with and perceptions of the ways those disabilities are thought to limit activities and accomplishments. However, NLTS2 findings suggest that family expectations for the future also help shape the achievements of youth with disabilities, irrespective of the nature of the youth's disabilities and their levels of functioning, particularly with regard to academic engagement and achievement. Other things being equal, youth with disabilities whose parents expect them to go on to postsecondary education after high school have more positive engagement and achievements while in high school than youth whose parents do not share that optimism for the future.

When holding disability, functioning, or other differences among youth constant, youth with disabilities whose parents expect them to go on to postsecondary education are more likely to:

- ◆ Have positive classroom engagement behaviors in all settings and receive better grades than youth who are not expected to continue their education.
- ◆ Be closer to grade level in their tested reading and math abilities than youth who are not expected to further their education after high school.
- ◆ Avoid disciplinary actions and affiliate with organized groups, many of which may be sponsored by or meet at school.

In the independence domain, when controlling for other differences, youth with disabilities whose parents have high expectations that they will live independently in the future are more likely to:

- ◆ Assume household responsibilities while in high school than are those who are not expected to live independently.

Looking Ahead

This report describes families' involvement at home and at school in support of their children's education during the secondary school years. Many families will need to continue to assist their children beyond the secondary school years, often by acting as a case manager. 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.