Improving Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

Overview

In December 2021 SREB received a request for information from staff at the South Carolina Department of Education. These staff wanted to know about best practices and examples of state initiatives to help students with disabilities, with a focus on:

- Improving the high school graduation rate
- Improving postsecondary enrollment and persistence
- Improving enrollment and completion of career and technical education programs of study, especially in rural areas where transportation is a barrier

A review of research on the three areas of interest was conducted, and this document is a summary of the findings.

Actions to Consider

Actions the state can take to address the three areas of interest are summarized below:

Improving the high school graduation rate

1. Ensure that general education teachers receive adequate training and professional development for teaching students with disabilities, both in teacher preparation programs and after they begin teaching.
2. Ensure that appropriate testing accommodations are provided for students with disabilities on state assessments so they can fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
3. Disaggregate student data to investigate the reasons students with different disabilities fail to graduate, and explore potential solutions. These may vary by disability.

Improving postsecondary enrollment and persistence

1. Provide resources and professional learning for postsecondary faculty to better equip them to instruct students with disabilities.

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2. Remove barriers that keep students with disabilities from receiving the accommodations they need in postsecondary settings. For example, require institutes of higher education to accept documentation from high school to demonstrate a student's eligibility for these accommodations.

Improving enrollment and completion of CTE programs of study

1. Provide guidance and professional development opportunities to better equip CTE instructors to teach students with disabilities.
2. Leverage technology such as virtual meeting platforms, immersive learning experiences and virtual job shadowing to increase the quality of CTE for rural students and support learning for CTE students with disabilities.
3. Provide stackable CTE credentials so learners can acquire partial certifications for employment as they work to complete a CTE program.

Exemplar States

High school graduation rate

Some states have managed to minimize the gap between the graduation rate for their students with disabilities and the rate for all students. Publicly available information does not shed light, though, on how they have accomplished this. The following table shows the 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for all students compared to students with disabilities for three states, compared with South Carolina.

4-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, 2018-2019

	All Students	Students with Disabilities	Gap (percentage points)
Arkansas	87.6%	82.6%	5.0
Florida	87.2%	81.0%	6.2
Oklahoma	84.9%	79.1%	5.8
South Carolina	81.1%	54.4%	26.7

Adapted by SREB from a table prepared by The Advocacy Institute; see Appendix A.

The U.S. Department of Education funded the Rural High School Dropout Prevention Project, which provided technical assistance to 14 states and certain schools in rural areas until 2016. Five SREB states were represented in this initiative: Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma and West Virginia. Below are the ways in which they were recognized in a Harmon & Smink review in 2017.

Arkansas: Legislation requires every school district to provide at least one alternative education option. The state also funds the Arkansas Student GPS Dashboard, a student data and early warning system.

North Carolina: Graduation coaches work with 20-25 high-risk ninth graders to support them in improving their attendance, behavior and academic performance.

Oklahoma: Legislation requires every school district to provide alternative education options that address 17 specific needs of students at high risk of dropping out.

West Virginia: Legislation created School Innovation Zones, with district grants to enable them to create or modify programs to address dropout prevention and recovery.

Vermont was also recognized for several support systems designed to help prevent students from dropping out of school. These strategies are available to all students and include increased access to dual enrollment opportunities, personalized learning plans and multiple pathways to graduation, and learning opportunities outside of school.

CTE enrollment and completion

Micro-industry engagement, used in states that include **Louisiana**, is a new way to connect CTE students and industry experts so learners can explore industry options, obtain virtual feedback on projects, and benefit from mentorship. Louisiana uses an online platform to facilitate these connections and incentivizes schools by offering rebates for achieving a certain number of student-mentor contacts.

New Hampshire established a statewide system of career and technical education centers.

In **Oklahoma**, 29 state career technology center districts consisting of 58 campuses provide learning opportunities for secondary students and adult learners. Some of these districts serve students from as many as 57 individual schools.

Educators in **Tennessee** may participate in training on special education and work-based learning in CTE, which enables them to earn a work-based learning certificate and teach WBL courses. State administrators have reported that this training led to CTE teachers better understanding the needs of students with disabilities and an increase in participation in WBL for students with disabilities.

West Virginia launched its Simulated Workforce program in 2013 and scaled it statewide in 2015, with protocols in place to ensure program consistency and quality. High school classrooms become businesses where students must interview for entry, accept a role, and participate in tasks like developing company policies and going through company trainings. Students are treated as employees in the "workplace," and indeed, some of these Simulated Workplaces operate as entrepreneurial businesses within the school setting, completing projects for the community and earning money that in turn helps fund the program.

Research Summary

Only 54% of students with disabilities in South Carolina graduated in 2018-19, compared with 81% of all students. No one factor can explain the large discrepancy in these graduation rates. The National Center for Learning Disabilities advocates for students with disabilities to graduate high school with a regular diploma. Separate special education high school diploma options may result in different expectations for students with disabilities and shut them out of future learning opportunities. South Carolina already ensures this is not the case by offering a single diploma option, the South Carolina High School Credential.

There are a number of effective strategies for reducing dropout rates and improving high school graduation rates for students in general. The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified 15 effective strategies for reducing school dropout. These are organized into four groups: foundational strategies, early interventions, basic core strategies, and managing and improving instruction. Some of these 15 strategies are more specifically relevant to this RFI than others, and research on students with disabilities indicates that strategies to reduce high school dropout rates may have impacts for postsecondary and CTE learning as well — in fact, CTE programs are one of the strategies identified.

Professional Development

Helping teachers become even more effective and skilled at teaching students with disabilities through professional development is one effective strategy for reducing dropout rates. Highly effective teachers are the most important in-school influence on student outcomes. This is equally true for students with disabilities, yet according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities they are "far less likely [than their peers without disabilities] to have access to well-prepared and effective teachers." A 2017 piece from *The Hechinger Report* summarized the insufficiency of many general education teacher preparation programs when it comes to preparing teachers to instruct students with disabilities.

There is also room for improvement when it comes to preparing CTE instructors to teach students with disabilities. Both the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Advance CTE encourage states to **provide interdisciplinary professional development opportunities** that "include CTE instructors, special education teachers, general education teachers and specialized instructional support personnel to equip CTE instructors with the necessary knowledge and skills to serve students with disabilities effectively." The Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth also recommends that states **provide guidance and professional development to CTE teachers** to increase their ability to serve students with disabilities.

Professional learning resources could also be helpful for postsecondary faculty. Research in 2015 showed that among the barriers to persistence for students with disabilities in postsecondary learning are faculty perceptions of the students' abilities and expectations

for their success. Students are unwilling to "out" themselves as having disabilities or to face lower expectations. They may also not know how to advocate for their needs and could benefit if their professors were more familiar with those needs.

Educational Technology

The Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth in 2021 examined state strategies for mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on CTE learning for students with disabilities. Some of these strategies could have positive effects for a long time to come. The center suggested **continuing solutions for providing learning remotely** — such as using virtual meeting platforms for group assignments, providing virtual job exploration and job shadowing opportunities, and using simulations and immersive technology — to expand access to CTE programs and better serve the unique needs of learners with disabilities.

Advance CTE recommended in 2017 that states **leverage technology** to "bring the workplace to learners" and connect learners and industry partners, which is one way to circumvent the transportation barriers that CTE students in rural areas may face and to compensate for a lack of industry in some rural areas. This could include investing in broadband internet and in the equipment needed for streaming content and videoconferencing. In some states — like Nebraska and South Dakota — institutions of higher education have joined forces to offer mobile classrooms and labs that can move from school to school to offer face-to-face experiences.

Individualized Instruction

Appropriate accommodations for instruction and assessment should already be part of the support provided for students with disabilities. Nonetheless, the research conducted for this RFI reinforces the importance of ensuring that the assessments students are required to pass to graduate from high school and those given in postsecondary programs do not discriminate against students with disabilities or impede them from demonstrating their knowledge and skills. The National Center on Educational Outcomes maintains an *Accommodations Toolkit* that education leaders can use to review research summaries and policy analyses of specific accommodations for students with disabilities.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities notes that while 94% of high schoolers with disabilities received accommodations in high school, only 17% of postsecondary students with disabilities did. At the same time, 43% of students who had no accommodations in postsecondary wished they had them. This indicates that there is a disconnect between the accommodations that students need in postsecondary and those they receive.

One reason for this is that institutions of higher education often require a recent psychoeducational evaluation to prove a student's eligibility for accommodations. These evaluations are completed for free by schools, but students may not have one that is recent

enough to satisfy their IHE's requirements. Private evaluations can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars. Instead, NCLD suggests that IHEs be required to **accept an IEP or 504 plan** from a student's K-12 years as evidence that a student has a disability and requires accommodation. A bill called the RISE Act was first introduced to Congress in 2017 but has yet to pass. Rather than waiting for federal requirements, states could consider passing their own.

Even when eligibility for accommodations in postsecondary settings is not a problem, students may not have the knowledge and self-advocacy skills to access the accommodations they are due. While supports are provided by default in PK-12 settings, postsecondary students must know to register with their institution's disability services office and then take the additional step of requesting accommodations directly from each of their instructors. This requires of students both the wherewithal to take these actions and the willingness to "out" themselves to their instructors, important aspects of self-advocacy. Studies show that students who are explicitly taught **self-advocacy skills** are better able to obtain the accommodations they need. These skills could potentially be integrated into a secondary course or offered as a sort of required mini-course for students with disabilities to better equip them for postsecondary.

Students with disabilities already receive individualized instruction by law, but they are not a homogeneous group. While students with disabilities are less likely to graduate from high school than their classmates without identified disabilities, some disabilities have a larger impact on this difference than others, and the actions needed to mitigate these impacts may be different. Research indicates that education leaders need to **disaggregate student data** to investigate the reasons that students with different disabilities fail to graduate, and to explore potential solutions.

Career and Technical Education

CTE is a valuable way to keep students from dropping out of high school and to improve their ability to pursue postsecondary education and careers. It can be particularly valuable in rural settings, where some of the reasons students drop out include a culture that values work over education, a desire for relevant instruction, and the need to get a job and help support family. CTE programs can also provide benefits for students with disabilities and have been linked to lower dropout rates, better graduation and employment rates, and increased enrollment in postsecondary education for these students.

At the same time, students in rural areas may have limited access to career pathways compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. The available pathways may also not be well aligned to current employment opportunities in rural areas. Advance CTE noted in 2017 that "school districts and community colleges all too often face scarce funds, instructors and facilities, necessitating tradeoffs between the breadth and depth of the [CTE] programs they offer."

In a series of briefs called *CTE on the Frontier*, Advance CTE explores the challenges of providing CTE programs in rural areas and identifies promising practices to overcome these challenges and expand program quality and access. The strategies identified include **making use of technology** and **partnerships** between schools and institutions to offer robust career pathways for students in rural areas, and **identifying and addressing barriers** to CTE participation — such as schedule conflicts that force students to choose between core courses required for graduation and CTE courses.

Providing **stackable credentials** is a strategy that benefits all CTE learners, but especially students with disabilities, according to the Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth. CAPE-Youth notes that stackable credentials "provide increased flexibility and multiple entry and exit points for students whose educational pathways are interrupted" and allow students to earn partial credentials they can use to obtain employment even if they cannot yet reach full credentialing.

Ten states across the U.S., including five states in the SREB region, recently participated in a five-year initiative called New Skills for Youth. Through this initiative the states sought to "develop and scale high-quality career pathways, expand access to work-based learning opportunities, strengthen data and accountability to incentivize career readiness, and lay the foundation for sustaining career readiness efforts." Key takeaways from this work are many, but the three main recommendations are to **partner with the business community** to create career pathways and identify the skills most important to the current economy; **improve the quality of CTE programs** so that all result in a "meaningful" postsecondary degree or credential; and **prioritize career readiness** in school accountability systems.

Other strategies: Making dual enrollment courses more accessible

The United States Department of Education issued a "Questions and Answers" document in 2019 explaining several ways to expand students with disabilities' access to postsecondary opportunities. Beginning at age 16, a student's individualized education program must include postsecondary goals and the transition services, such as courses of study, needed to help the student achieve those goals. Dual enrollment is one way high school students can earn postsecondary credits, but the cost of these courses can be a barrier for some students.

USDOE writes that "IDEA funds can be used for appropriate education services included in an IEP that are provided outside of a public or private elementary or secondary school if the education provided is considered secondary school education in the State," and further notes that "States have the flexibility to interpret how 'secondary school' education is defined and would apply to dual enrollment programs in their State." In other words, a state could issue a policy stating that postsecondary courses that meet state standards are considered secondary education when attended by a high school student.

Then, as USDOE puts it, "if a student's IEP Team determines that a high school student's needs can best be met through participation in dual enrollment programs, which are offered on college campuses or in community-based settings, and classes from those programs are considered to meet secondary school education requirements by the State... the IEP Team could include those services in the student's IEP, and if appropriate to the needs of the student, could designate them as transition services." These courses could then be paid for by the district using IDEA funds, removing the barrier to entry that college tuition fees can pose.

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Appendix A: Gaps between 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for all students and students with disabilities, 2018-2019

Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR): School year 2018-2019			
STATE	All Students	Students with disabilities	GAP (in percentage points)
United States	85.8	68.2	17.6
Alabama	91.7	69.6	22.1
Alaska	80.4	60	20.4
Arizona	77.8	69.0	8.8
Arkansas	87.6	82.6	5
California	84.5	67.7	16.8
Colorado	81.1	59.2	21.9
Connecticut	88.5	67.8	20.7
Delaware	89.0	73	16
District of Columbia	68.9	51	17.9
Florida	87.2	81.0	6.2
Georgia	82.0	62.9	19.1
Hawaii	85.2	63	22.2
Idaho	80.8	56	24.8
Illinois	86.2	69.9	16.3
Indiana	87.2	71.4	15.8
Iowa	91.6	76.1	15.5
Kansas	87.2	78.4	8.8
Kentucky	90.6	75.5	15.1
Louisiana	80.1	64.7	15.4
Maine	87.4	73	14.4
Maryland	86.9	63.5	23.4
Massachusetts	88.0	73.9	14.1
Michigan	81.4	57.8	23.6
Minnesota	83.7	63.0	20.7
Mississippi	85.0	42.2	42.8
Missouri	89.7	76.7	13
Montana	86.6	78	8.6
Nebraska	88.4	69	19.4
Nevada	84.1	67.2	16.9
New Hampshire	88.4	72	16.4
New Jersey	90.6	79.2	11.4
New Mexico	75.1	64.7	10.4
New York	82.8	58.8	24
North Carolina	86.5	69.8	16.7
North Dakota	88.3	73	15.3
Ohio	82.0	48.0	34
Oklahoma[b]	84.9	79.1	5.8
Oregon	80.0	63.4	16.6
Pennsylvania	86.5	70.7	15.8
Rhode Island	83.9	64	19.9
South Carolina	81.1	54.4	26.7
South Dakota	84.1	72	12.1
Tennessee	90.5	73.9	16.6
Texas	90.0	77.9	12.1
Utah	87.4	72.4	15
Vermont	84.5	71	13.5
Virginia	87.5	62.9	24.6
Washington	81.1	62.2	18.9
West Virginia	91.3	78.7	12.6
Wisconsin	90.1	69.8	20.3
Wyoming	82.1	59	23.1

SOURCE: NCES 2018-2019 4-year ACGR
https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2018-19.asp

NOTE: There are some differences in how states implemented the requirements for the ACGR, leading to the potential for differences across states in how the rates are calculated. This is particularly applicable to the population of children with disabilities.

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