

PATHWAYS TO NOWHERE: POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN NEVADA

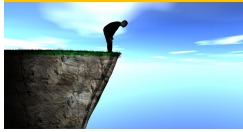


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Pathways to Nowhere: Post-Secondary Transitions for Students with Disabilities in Nevada

Executive Summary

Across the country, post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities lag behind those of their peers without disabilities. National data reveals that students without an identified disability graduate at a rate of 84.8 percent compared with just 63.1 percent of students with disabilities. Post-secondary transitions are also bleak for young people with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities have lower rates of employment and college enrollment and attainment. In 2012, only 24.2 percent of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities were employed in the United States.

Recent legislative reforms have laid the groundwork for strengthening pathways for post-secondary opportunities for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD). In 2014, the Federal government passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which provides new requirements designed to help “job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market.” WIOA provides stronger supports for job seekers with disabilities. Among the new requirements, WIOA now prescribes that state vocational rehabilitation agencies provide pre-employment transition services (PETS) and work more closely with state and local education agencies. These reforms are intended to improve post-secondary transitions and opportunities for students with disabilities. Coupled with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as part of the Individualized Education Program which requires schools to help secondary school students who are eligible for special education services prepare for the transition to adulthood as early as fourteen in Nevada, there now exists a strong legal framework to build and strengthen high quality pathways to post-secondary opportunities for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD).

However, despite landmark national legislation and recent reforms, students with IDD in Nevada continue to confront significant barriers to success. They remain a severely underserved group in their pursuit of quality special education services and face limited access to gainful employment and educational opportunities beyond graduation from high school. Only 27.6 percent of students with disabilities in Nevada graduated from high school (2014-2015 cohort). And in 2014, only 24 percent of students with disabilities had enrolled in institutions of higher education one year after graduation. In short, the pathways in Nevada to prepare successfully students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities for post-secondary opportunities are quite limited – meaning that there are significant gaps and barriers preventing students with disabilities for life beyond high school.

This policy report, *Pathways to Nowhere: Post-Secondary Transitions for Students with Disabilities in Nevada*, describes existing pathways preparing students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities for post-secondary opportunities, and identifies some of the barriers facing students as they prepare to transition to life beyond high school. This policy report concludes by offering a set of recommendations that the State’s decision makers, policy leaders, and agency officials may take under advisement. This report was informed by research and interviews with students with disabilities, special education teachers, school district officials, state agency officials, advocacy groups, and parents and guardians of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

Below the Guinn Center summarizes its recommendations.

For Families and Students

1. Contact advocacy groups to learn about legal rights under IDEA and FAPE

Parents and students should avail themselves of the various resources that exist throughout the State that provide comprehensive information about a student's rights under IDEA and FAPE and offer self-advocacy training. There are several advocacy groups around the State including Nevada PEP and Nevada Disability Advocacy and Law Center, as well as private advocacy and disability groups.

2. Develop a transition plan when the student is 14 years of age and work with the IEP team to identify opportunities that align with the interests, and preferences of the student

Parents and students should work closely with the student's IEP team develop to develop a transition plan when the student is 14 years of age. This plan should identify opportunities and programs that align with the interests of the students. The student, with parents, and the IEP team should review the transition plan at least once a year and revise as the student's interests or goals change.

For School Districts

1. Include measurable goals in the IEP transition plan

District officials should work with school leadership teams and IEP teams to ensure that the IEP transition plan contains measurable goals that align with the student's interests, which can then be reported to the district office. District officials should report out annually on post-secondary outcomes for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

2. District leadership should prioritize the expansion of high quality pathways leading to post-secondary opportunities for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities

School district leadership should prioritize the expansion of high quality pathways that prepare students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to find competitive integrated employment and/or pursue post-secondary educational opportunities (e.g., degree and/or certificate programs). School district leaders must identify human capital (e.g. personnel) and fiscal resources to support the expansion of transition programs and work-based opportunities. School district leadership should work with school (site-based) leadership teams (e.g., principals, assistant principals, counselors) to identify and develop pathways for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities at each school.

These efforts will require a shift at both the district office and school site in philosophy to one that sets out high expectations; training and accountability systems will need to align to a culture of high expectations for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

3. Expand transition programs for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities along the spectrum of need and capability

School districts should identify a strategic plan (and necessary resources) for piloting and/or expanding transition programs (and available seats) for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. As part of this strategic plan, school districts should identify how to provide pathways and transition-related programming for students with disabilities along the entire spectrum of ability and need.

4. Encourage participation in CTE programs and expand access to students with IEPs

Districts and school site leaders should work with the Nevada Department of Education to explore ways to increase participation by students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in CTE programs. Previously, students with IEPs participated in CTE programs at higher rates than they do currently. Generally, students who participate in CTE programs have better educational outcomes. District officials, school leadership teams, and IEP teams should begin exploring career interests with students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in middle school and share information about CTE programs in middle school with the students and their families. District officials and school leadership teams should explore creative ways to expose students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to the wide selection of CTE programs.

5. Establish a career-ready skills course at every high school in Nevada

Many school districts have formal transition programs (e.g., Project SEARCH, JEEP, VOICE, etc.) including comprehensive life skills courses (as was implemented in Elko County School District). However, there are existing resources and programs that school districts and school site leadership teams could leverage in order to deliver transition-related programming at every high school in Nevada and in cost-effective ways.

For example, many high schools offer life skills or college preparation elective courses. School based leadership teams could leverage these existing courses to have a section for students with disabilities or have a section that emphasizes career-ready skills (e.g., writing cover letters and resumes, filling out on-line job applications, soft skills). Special education teachers or self-contained classroom teachers could be trained to also deliver a course or curriculum on career-ready skills. Again, the new WIOA requirements that require DETR-BVR to fund PETS services could support these new programming efforts.

6. Clarify the role of transition specialists

Stakeholders share that there is a lack of clarity around the role of the transition specialists (particularly in CCSD), who are not required members of the IEP team. While viewed as helpful, they appear to become engaged in a student's transition plan only after it becomes apparent that the student will pursue an adjusted diploma. District officials should clarify the role of the transition specialists, share that information with students and families, and articulate how the transition specialist complement the work of other agencies (e.g., DETR-BVR vocational rehabilitation counselors).

Depending on the role of the transition specialist, school districts in urban areas should consider dedicating resources to increase the number of transition specialists. This would enable each transition

specialist to spend more time on each individual student's transition plan. Additionally, this might also enable the transition specialists to spend time identifying work-based opportunities for students and developing relationships with local employers who might provide internships or work-based experiences for high school students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Given WIOA's emphasis on work-based experiences and internships for students with disabilities, this would be an important responsibility of transition specialists.

Rural school districts should consider setting aside resources to hire at least one transition coordinator who could support transition efforts across all schools within the district. The transition coordinator could assume primary responsibility for identifying and engaging employers in the district that would be willing to offer work-based learning experiences or post-secondary employment opportunities, or partner to support a formal transition program (e.g. Project SEARCH).

7. Place vocational rehabilitation counselors at key high school campuses

Given the expertise of DETR-BVR vocational rehabilitation counselors, school districts and school site leadership teams should consider placing DETR-BVR vocational rehabilitation counselors at key high schools. As stated previously, participation in DETR-BVR programs is low and many schools do not refer their transition-age students who receive special education services to DETR-BVR. The new WIOA requirements provide an opportunity to strengthen the seamless integration of service delivery between LEAs and DETR-BVR. DETR-BVR should work with school districts to explore opportunities to place job developers, job coaches, and/or DETR-BVR counselors on high school campuses as part of its transition program, or as part of its required pre-employment transition services (PETS).

8. Increase training for special education facilitators and transition specialists

District officials should consider expanding the type and scope of professional development and/or skills training to special education facilitators and transition specialists so that they understand how to effectively address transition planning in a student's IEP and have more complete knowledge of the relevant programs and opportunities available to students who are eligible for special education services. For example, in Clark County School District, district officials and transition specialists were not aware of several summer programs offered by Goodwill Industries of Southern Nevada for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Trainings could include regular presentations from representatives of community organizations.

9. Establish a transition council in each district

Each school district should consider establishing a transition council comprised of representatives from the school district, higher education, parents, teachers/educators, the Regional Center, DETR-BVR, non-profit advocacy groups and service providers, and local business representatives. The purpose of the transition council would be to share information and explore ways together to improve the quality and rigor of pathways and transition programs for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Collectively, the council could help expand work-based learning opportunities and post-secondary employment. The transition council could be particularly helpful in rural communities where resources and opportunities are limited.

10. Support and expand Jobs for America's Graduates – Nevada

Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) Nevada is a national nonprofit that launched in Nevada in 2012. The purpose of the program is to help reduce the dropout crisis by providing support toward graduating high school and comprehensive job training and placement to at-risk youth. Since its inception, JAG Nevada has grown from supporting students at eight schools in Clark, Lyon and Washoe counties to 37 schools in 10 counties in 2016. The program will be offered at 50 schools in 12 counties in 2017. Participants in the JAG Nevada program have seen improved outcomes compared to their peers. JAG Nevada graduates in 2014 had a 73.6 percent graduation rate, which exceeds the State graduation rate. JAG Nevada has also reported success in placing students after they graduate from high school. For the 2014 cohort, 89.7 percent were either working fulltime or enrolled in school fulltime.

What makes the JAG Nevada graduation rate particularly remarkable is that the program specifically targets at-risk students who face significant barriers to their academic success. And, currently, slightly more than 10 percent of current JAG Nevada participants have a documented disability. The Nevada Legislature allocated \$1.7 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 and \$2.8 million in FY2017 to continue to expand the program across the State.

For Nevada Department of Education

1. Limit issuance of the adjusted diploma and offer alternate career pathways

In recent months, the Nevada Department of Education and its High School Graduation Committee have examined existing secondary school pathways to assess whether they produce outcomes (e.g., diplomas) that have value and prepare students for college or competitive integrated employment. Specifically, NDE has discussed the feasibility and possible benefits of offering technical and/or academic pathways that are aligned, yet distinct.

Simultaneously, NDE is proposing comprehensive special education graduation reform (Assembly Bill 64) that provides alternate pathways or avenues for students with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. If approved, Assembly Bill (AB) 64 would allow a student with a disability to receive a standard diploma if "his or her individualized education program team determines that the pupil demonstrates proficiency in the standards of content and performance established by the Council to Establish Academic Standards for Public Schools [and] the pupil satisfies the requirements set forth in his or her individualized education program." In other words, AB 64, if approved, would enable students with disabilities to demonstrate proficiency on course content standards in ways other than taking the End Of Course Exams (EOC). A student, for example, might be able to submit a portfolio of work.

This proposed reform would allow full consideration of the disabilities on an individual basis, and allow students to demonstrate that they have learned the material and possess the requisite skills commiserate with their peers who are not eligible for special education services.

Under this proposed system of expanded pathways, NDE would advise that the use of the adjusted diploma be reserved for the State's most severely impacted students with disabilities. Specifically, NDE would propose that the adjusted diploma option would remain available only to students assessed on the Nevada Alternative Assessment (NAA).

Forty other states in the United States have removed special diplomas for students with IEPs. Several states have implemented distinct technical and academic pathways. For example, in Louisiana, secondary students have the option of pursuing distinct Tech and University Pathways. In this framework, 9th and 10th grade students take the same core academic classes to work towards a diploma. In 11th grade, a student may choose to work toward a Jump Start TOPS Tech Pathway or pursue the TOPS University Pathway. Students may choose both pathways. Decisions are made with counseling and guidance, based on the student's interests, capabilities, and ambitions. The Career Tech diploma includes course sequences, workplace experiences, and credentials for a career. In Louisiana, students with disabilities are eligible for an alternative pathway to a Jump Start diploma provided that they meet one of the following eligibility criteria: (1) Enter high school having not achieved at least a combination of basic/approaching basic on math and English Language Arts in two of the three most recent years (6th, 7th, and 8th grades) or (2) Does not achieve a score of Fair, Good, or Excellent after two attempts of the same End of Course assessments. The IEP team determines the appropriate exit goals, credentials, and individual performance criteria for classroom and End of Course assessments the student must meet to achieve the standard diploma requirements.

Efforts to limit the issuance of the adjusted diploma and offer alternate pathways would benefit students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Self-advocates and advocacy groups should consider supporting these legislative efforts.

2. Increase accountability around transition and post-secondary outcomes for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities

The federal government requires that each state report data on a standard set of outcomes (e.g., Indicators 1 and 2, graduation rates and dropout rates for students with disabilities, respectively). The state education agency is also responsible for two transition-focused indicators (Indicators 13 and 14). During compliance monitoring, districts are held accountable to eight measures of transition in the IEP and must revise any IEP that is found out of compliance on any one of the eight measures within one year. Additionally, districts must administer an annual survey of students one year following their exit and the results are made available to districts through Nevada's Special Education Accountability and Reporting System (NV SEARS) to be used in transition improvement efforts. Many districts and special education teachers are focused on compliance rather. Working with local education agencies, NDE should explore ways to identify an additional set of performance metrics or indicators that can be used to assess the *quality* of pathways available to students with disabilities to prepare them for higher education or careers (competitive integrated employment).

3. Establish incentive funds or special education teachers

There are several existing options that our school district leaders can leverage to help increase the number of special education teachers in Nevada and provide them with support. In 2015, the Legislature passed a

performance pay bill (Assembly Bill 483), that requires school districts to set aside funds to provide incentives to teachers. The Lyon County School District is using its performance pay funds to recruit and retain special education teachers by providing a \$3,000 salary bump. Districts can access the New Teacher Incentive Fund (SB 511) to direct resources to Title I schools with dire need to recruit and retain special education teachers. Additionally, districts can access the Great Teaching and Leading Fund (SB 474) to provide effective professional development opportunities for special education teachers.

For Institutions of Higher Education

1. Prioritize scholarships for students who seek special education degrees

In 2015, Nevada funded the Teach Nevada Scholarships and the New Teacher Incentive Fund. Universities in Nevada should prioritize the award of Teach Nevada Scholarships to individuals pursuing special education teaching degrees.

For State Agencies

1. Place job counselors and job developers at school sites

Currently, DETR-BVR supports several of the transition programs that exist at high schools around the Silver State. Given the new WIOA requirements, DETR-BVR should explore opportunities to place job developers, job coaches, and/or DETR-BVR vocational rehabilitation counselors on high school campuses. This could be as part of its required pre-employment transition services (PETS) programming and/or as part of its existing transition programs (e.g., JEEP, VOICE).

2. Improve the integration of service delivery

DETR-BVR should continue to facilitate efforts to improve the integration of service delivery across workforce development and education agencies. DETR-BVR and Regional Centers should coordinate efforts to improve the delivery of services to individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities across the State.

3. Encourage Regional Centers to conduct outreach regularly at high schools

Regional Center representatives should regularly visit high schools (and middle schools) and meet with IEP teams, parents, and students who are eligible for special education services to discuss the supported employment services the Regional Centers provide and share information about eligibility.

4. Use community based assessments that align with a student's interests

Non-profit service providers, workforce development boards, and state agencies should develop and use community-based assessments that more appropriately align with a student's interests and skills.

For Community Stakeholders

1. Develop marketing campaign to expand employer engagement

As part of statewide conversations, education and workforce development leaders have discussed the need to develop a marketing campaign to highlight the importance of developing high quality career and college pathways. As part of this marketing campaign, decision makers should develop a complementary message that encourages more employers to help strengthen career pathways for students with disabilities by providing work-based learning experiences and internships.

2. Create incentives to expand employer engagement

Nevada should explore developing incentives, such as tax incentives, to encourage employers to support students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities by providing internships, hosting community based assessments, and by offering full-time competitive integrated employment.

3. Explore ways to expand non-profit service providers in rural areas

Transition-age students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in Nevada's rural communities are isolated. Transportation challenges make it difficult to access services in the State's two urban areas. And there are very few service providers in rural Nevada. Stakeholders should explore innovative ways to increase the presence and/or delivery of pre-employment transition services in Nevada's rural counties.

School district leadership should explore ways to leverage existing community assets and resources to identify post-transition employment opportunities for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. For example, the Nye County Communities Coalition has orchestrated coordinated work with the Nye County School District, which has led to positive employment outcomes in the community.

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The Kenny C. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, bipartisan, independent research center focused on providing fact-based, relevant, and well-reasoned analysis of critical policy issues facing Nevada and the Intermountain West. The Guinn Center engages policy-makers, experts, and the public with innovative, data-driven research and analysis to advance policy solutions, inform the public debate, and expand public engagement.

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