

# 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 of 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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students take the same core academic classes to work towards a diploma. In 11<sup>th</sup> 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 (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> 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.

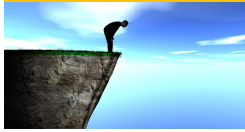
### **2. Create incentives to expand employer engagement**

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.



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

### **Introduction**

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> WIOA provides stronger supports for job seekers with disabilities. Among the new requirements, WIOA now prescribes that state vocational rehabilitation agencies and local education agencies provide pre-employment transition services. 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 disabilities.

However, despite landmark national legislation and recent reforms, students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities 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. As reported in the 2016 *Building a Grad Nation* Report, national data reveals that students without an identified disability graduate at a rate of 84.8 percent compared with only 63.1 percent of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities graduate at a rate of nearly 20 points lower than the average graduation rate for all students, and the achievement gaps in more than half of all states is equal to or exceeds the national gap.<sup>5</sup> The report, however, purports that approximately 9 out of 10 students with an identified disability are capable of graduating from high school if given adequate support and services.

Post-secondary transitions are also bleak for young people with disabilities. For example, individuals with disabilities have lower rates of employment and college enrollment and attainment. However, if sufficiently prepared for post-secondary life and education through schooling, students with disabilities are shown to secure employment and attain other positive outcomes.

In Nevada, only 27.6 percent of students with disabilities in Nevada graduated from high school (2014-2015 cohort).<sup>6</sup> 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 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. The analysis presented here 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.

## **Policy and Legal Frameworks**

Every student has the right to a quality education, no matter their level of ability. Passed in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that students with a disability who are determined eligible for special education services (students with disabilities) are provided with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) that is tailored to their individual needs. A Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) means that special education and related services with specially designed instruction are provided to students at no cost.

IDEA ensures that students who are eligible for special education services, ages 3 to 22 in Nevada, have the right to FAPE, including students with disabilities who have been suspended or expelled from school, or until they earn a standard diploma.<sup>7</sup> Revisions to IDEA in 2004 mandated “schools to prepare students with disabilities for adult employment post-secondary education, independent living, and community participation.”<sup>8</sup> To address remaining gaps, in 2010, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) identified 16 evidence based predictors of success and evidence-based practices for secondary transition. Among these are: exit exam requirements, high school diploma status, self-advocacy/self-determination, self-care/independent living, community experiences, social skills, career awareness, occupational courses, paid employment/work experience, vocational education/work study, parental involvement, inclusion in general education, program of study, student support, transition programming, and interagency collaboration.<sup>9</sup>

IDEA requires that students who are eligible to receive special education services have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which guarantees students receive a FAPE. And per the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, “the IEP must include: appropriate measurable post-secondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.”<sup>10</sup> Nevada law requires that transition planning begin no later than age 14.<sup>11</sup> The plan should be student focused and reflect his (her) choices, preferences, interests, and needs in the areas of education and training, employment, adult living arrangements, and community experiences. The IEP team, in identifying annual goals and services for a student, must determine what specific programs and

opportunities (e.g., internships, work-based learning experiences) will align with the student's interests and help the student prepare for the transition from school to adult life.

Additionally, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), enacted into law in 2014 (replacing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and amending the Rehabilitation Act of 1973), is designed to help "job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy."<sup>12</sup> WIOA was the first federal legislative reform in 15 years of the public workforce system and included support for individuals with disabilities.

Specifically, WIOA increased access for individuals with disabilities to high quality workforce services to prepare them for competitive integrated employment. Under WIOA's new requirements, students with disabilities are eligible to receive extensive pre-employment transition services, and state vocational rehabilitation agencies are mandated now to set aside at least 15 percent of federal funding to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities.

Additional new WIOA requirements include:

- Submission of a combined or unified state plan by core partners (Adult, Dislocated Workers and Youth, Wagner-Peyser, Adult Education and Family Literacy and Vocational Rehabilitation), which Nevada submitted in July 2016;<sup>13</sup>
- Better alignment of systems thereby reducing duplication of efforts and creating career pathways;
- Data sharing and collecting and reporting on common performance measures;
- Focusing vocational rehabilitation program funding and efforts toward serving students with disabilities and requiring pre-employment transition services for them; and
- Focusing vocational rehabilitation programs on individuals with the most significant disabilities and providing support services to them such that they may achieve competitive integrated employment.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, recent revisions to Section 511 of WIOA now require youth to determine eligibility through the State's vocational rehabilitation agency before they can secure employment that pays subminimum wage.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the student must be determined "ineligible for vocational rehabilitation services, or be accepted for vocational rehabilitation services and be unsuccessful in achieving an employment outcome after a reasonable period of time;" and the student must "receive career counseling, and information and referrals from the vocational rehabilitation agency to programs and other resources in the local area that offer employment-related services designed to help the youth attain competitive integrated employment."<sup>16</sup>

WIOA increased the responsibility of workforce development boards and career one-stops to be fully accessible and offer necessary accommodations to provide job seekers with disabilities effective and meaningful participation in all goods, services, and career pathways.

However, despite landmark national legislation and recent reforms, secondary school students who are eligible for special education services continue to confront significant barriers that prevent them from accessing and moving along high quality career and college pathways that prepare them for life beyond high school with positive outcomes (e.g., secondary degrees/certificates and competitive integrated employment).



## Nevada Landscape

### Students with Disabilities in Nevada's K-12 Public Schools

Currently, 11.8 percent of Nevada's K-12 public school enrollment are students participating in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and are designated as special education students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).<sup>a</sup> Students with IEPs may have any one (or more) identified disability.

The number of students with IEPs in Nevada's K-12 public education system has increased as the population has increased. In 2003-2004, there were 42,543 students receiving special education services. In 2014-2015, there were 54,312 students receiving special education services (see Table 1). The school districts in Nevada that have higher percentages of students with IEPs are: Mineral County (17.7 percent), Storey County (17.0), Churchill County (15.6 percent), Nye County (15.2 percent), Humboldt County (14.8 percent), White Pine County (14.7 percent), and Douglas County (14.2 percent). Rural school districts have higher percentages of individuals with disabilities than the State's urban districts.

**Table 1. Students with Disabilities in Nevada's K-12 Public Schools<sup>b</sup>**

	Total Enrollment	IEP students	IEP as % of enrollment	IEP Secondary Students (est)
2014-2015				
State	459,095	54,312	11.8	18,104
Carson City	7,526	948	12.6	316
Churchill	3,488	545	15.6	182
Clark	318,040	37,000	11.6	12,333
Douglas	6,054	858	14.2	286
Elko	9,859	1,103	11.2	368
Esmeralda	74			-
Eureka	247	23	9.3	8
Humboldt	3,473	513	14.8	171
Lander	1,049	109	10.4	36
Lincoln	1,015	124	12.2	41
Lyon	8,065	1,019	12.6	340
Mineral	475	84	17.7	28
Nye	5,167	786	15.2	262
Pershing	692	92	13.3	31
Storey	401	68	17.0	23
Washoe	63,108	8,317	13.2	2,772
White Pine	1,250	184	14.7	61
State Charters	20,104	1,577	7.8	526

<sup>a</sup> An IEP includes: "(1) a statement of the child's present levels of education performance; (2) a statement of annual goals, including short-term instructional objectives; (3) a statement of specific education services to be provided and the extent to which the child will be able to participate in regular education programs; (4) a projected date for initiation and anticipated duration of services; and (5) appropriate objectives, criteria, and evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, on at least an annual basis, whether instructional objectives are being achieved."

<sup>b</sup> The Guinn Center estimates the number of IEP students in grades 9-12 by multiplying the total IEP enrollment by 0.33. Based on the number of graduates with IEPs in 2014 (4,241), the number could be as low as 16,964.



Recent 2015-2016 data reveals that 11.4 percent of Nevada’s students have autism, 4.3 percent have an intellectual disability, and 2.7 percent have multiple disabilities (Table 2). The percentage of students with autism in Nevada exceeded the national rate, and local advocates report that the rate is increasing annually.

**Table 2. Children (ages 6-21) with Disabilities, 2015-2016<sup>17</sup>**

	Nevada	U.S.
Autism	11.4%	9.1%
Deaf-blindness	0%	0%
Developmental Delays	.	2.5%
Emotional disturbance	3.9%	5.7%
Hearing Impairment	0.9%	1.1%
Intellectual Disabilities	4.3%	6.9%
Multiple Disabilities	2.7%	2.1%
Orthopedic Impairments	0.6%	0.7%
Other Health Impairments	10.3%	15.0%
Specific Learning Disabilities	51.0%	38.8%
Speech or Language Impairment	14.3%	17.3%
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.4%	0.4%
Visual Impairment	0.3%	0.4%
All disabilities	100%	100.0%

Table 3 presents information on the percent of children (ages 6-21) with disabilities by race and ethnicity in Nevada. The yellow highlighted boxes indicate where the percentage of children with a specific disability are overrepresented based on their share of the total student population. African-Americans represent 10.2 percent of student enrollment, but account for 14.1 percent of students with disabilities.

**Table 3. Percent of Children with Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, Nevada 2015-2016<sup>18</sup>**

	Latino	African American	White	Asian	American Indian	Pacific Islander	2 or more races
All students	41.1	10.2	35.1	5.5	1.0	1.3	5.8
All disabilities	39.3	14.1	36.0	2.5	1.6	0.9	5.7
Autism	9.2	7.5	13.7	30.9	6.3	11.9	14.0
Deaf-blindness	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	.	0.0	0.0
Emotional disturbance	2.2	6.6	4.8	1.3	2.4	3.3	5.5
Hearing impairment	1.2	0.6	0.7	1.8	0.9	1.9	0.8
Intellectual disabilities	4.9	5.2	3.2	6.5	4.1	4.9	3.8
Multiple disabilities	2.6	2.7	2.7	5.8	1.5	4.0	2.5
Orthopedic impairment	0.5	0.6	0.7	1.1	0.5	0.5	0.5
Other health impairments	6.7	10.3	14.2	4.8	9.9	6.8	12.3
Specific learning disabilities	60.3	57.5	41.0	28.2	59.0	50.7	41.5
Speech or language Impairment	12.0	8.3	18.3	18.7	14.5	15.2	18.3
Traumatic brain injury	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.9	0.4
Visual impairment	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.4
All Disabilities	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4 lists the breakdown of children with disabilities by county in Nevada as of 2014. More than 11.0 percent of students between the ages of 6-21 had autism, 10.0 percent had developmental delays, 4.0 percent have an intellectual disability, and 2.5 percent have multiple disabilities.

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**Table 4. Children (ages 6-21) with disabilities, by county, 2014<sup>19</sup>**

2014-2015	All Disabilities	Autism	Deaf- Blindness	Developmental Delay	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Intellectual Disability	Multiple Disabilities	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Specific Learning Disabilities	Speech or Language Impairment	Traumatic Brain Injury	Visual Impairment
Carson City	1,007	54	0	72	27	13	21	19	-	132	444	216	-	-
Churchill	587	29	0	79	-	-	21	-	-	22	316	99	-	-
Clark	36,486	4,586	0	4,278	1,322	401	1,469	991	265	2,687	15,349	4,877	140	115
Douglas	927	66	-	48	25	13	30	13	-	153	354	208	-	-
Elko	1,113	58	0	68	14	-	55	14	-	78	603	200	-	-
Esmeralda	-	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	0	0
Eureka	24	0	0	-	0	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Humboldt	521	40	0	55	15	0	22	-	-	20	275	82	0	0
Lander	110	-	0	15	0	0	-	-	0	-	52	19	0	0
Lincoln	127	-	0	10	-	0	-	0	0	-	66	41	-	0
Lyon	1,098	114	-	73	44	12	50	16	-	187	365	227	0	-
Mineral	82	-	0	-	-	0	-	-	-	14	38	-	0	-
Nye	854	41	0	69	44	-	48	13	-	55	489	84	-	-
Pershing	95	-	0	17	0	-	-	-	-	-	46	14	0	-
Storey	67	-	0	-	-	0	-	-	0	-	38	13	0	0
Washoe	8,840	702	-	735	276	54	314	177	21	1,069	4,059	1,383	29	20
White Pine	190	-	0	21	-	0	-	-	-	35	78	35	-	0
State Charters	1,603	222	0	53	75	-	-	-	-	229	645	342	-	0
<b>Total State</b>	<b>53,731</b>	<b>5,912</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>5,593</b>	<b>1,842</b>	<b>493</b>	<b>2,030</b>	<b>1,243</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>4,681</b>	<b>23,217</b>	<b>7,840</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>135</b>

## Secondary School Pathways in Nevada

High school students enrolled in special education services have several graduation options and certifications available to them with differing requirements based on the abilities of the student.<sup>20</sup> Each has distinct criteria and aims to meet the needs and assess the abilities of the student. In Nevada, students must earn a minimum of 22.5 credits (including several required core courses) and pass requisite exams to receive a standard high school diploma. In previous years, students in Nevada were expected to pass the Nevada High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE) which assessed proficiency in reading, mathematics, writing, and science. Passing rates for students with disabilities were low, preventing many from graduating with a standard high school diploma.

Alternative graduation options include an adjusted diploma and an adult standard diploma. The “adjusted diploma” is a diploma which evidences graduation from high school of a student with a disability after the student has met special requirements or adjusted standards as identified by the Individualized Education Program (IEP). This graduation option is typically awarded to students with disabilities that struggle to pass standardized summative examinations, but who meet the standard graduation requirements. The adjusted diploma is still considered a high school diploma but indicates the adjustments made on school transcripts. The decision to have a student pursue a pathway that leads to an adjusted diploma (as opposed to a standard diploma) must be made by the IEP team and the student must meet requirements in their IEP. The IEP team may include the student with disabilities, parents, both regular and special education teachers, a district representative, and any other individual with special knowledge or expertise about the student, the disability, and the student’s rights (e.g., Child Advocate).

In accordance with their IEPs, students may be placed in classroom environments that limit their access to the general education curriculum and standards. Self-contained and resource room placements provide supports and services to facilitate access to the general education curriculum as much as possible, but the pace and rigor often fall far below grade level expectations. When these students participate in standardized testing, they are presented with information and topics about which they have limited to no familiarity. An adjusted diploma pathway may take these factors into consideration and allow a student to exit high school with some credentials.

Nevada developed the Nevada Alternate Assessment (NAA) for students whom participation in the general statewide assessment is not appropriate, even with accommodations. The NAA is a grade level alternate assessment of academic performance on Nevada Content Standards for a percentage of students who receive special education services. IDEA requires that students with disabilities be included in each state’s system of accountability and demonstrate access to the general education curriculum. These federal laws ensure that all students are taught with their peers while being academically challenged and taught to high standards. Based on the new Every Student Succeeds Act rules, the NAA cannot be administered to more than 1 percent of “all students in Nevada who meet the strict criteria required in order to be assessed with the NAA.”<sup>21</sup>

Adult high school programs are geared towards out-of-school individuals who are over the age of 17 and want to earn a high school diploma or a Nevada State Certificate of High School Equivalency (HSE).<sup>c</sup> This option may apply to students that are no longer attending but are enrolled in a high school or who are credit deficient. Students attending established high schools who want to earn credit from Adult Education to be transferred to their high schools may earn an “adult standard diploma.” This option is a diploma which evidences the graduation from high school of a person who has met the requirements for graduation through: (1) an adult high school program established by a school district; or (2) an alternative program for the education of pupils at risk of dropping out of school established by a school district.

Under IDEA, students who receive special education services and graduate with an adjusted diploma are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) until aging out (22 years in Nevada). Similarly, students pursuing a standard diploma are entitled to FAPE until they graduate or age out.

## Graduation Rates and Educational Attainment

Nationally, educational outcomes and post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities lag behind those of their peers who do not have disabilities. In 2012-2013, less than one-third (31.2 percent) of students with disabilities in Nevada graduated with a standard high school diploma (compared to the national average of 65.2 percent) (see Table 5). One-fifth (20.4 percent) received a certificate, and 45.0 percent were classified as dropouts. While students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) qualify for special education services until the age of 22, only 3 percent of students with disabilities aged out under this provision.

**Table 5. High School Exit Status (2012-2013)** <sup>22,d</sup>

<b>Students with disabilities (ages 14-21)</b>	<b>Nevada</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
Graduated with standard high school diploma	31.2%	65.2%
Received a certificate	20.4%	14.4%
Dropped out	45.0%	18.6%
Reached maximum age	3.0%	1.5%

In 2014-2015, only 29 percent of students with disabilities in Nevada graduated, compared to a graduation rate of 71.3 percent for all students in Nevada. This achievement gap of 42.3 points was the second biggest in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Table 6 provides comparative information for Nevada and the Intermountain West states. In Clark County School District, the 2015 graduation rate for students with disabilities was 28

<sup>c</sup> Nevada Department of Education has approved the following high school equivalency exams: GED, TASC and HiSET.

<sup>d</sup> Certificate refers to “certificate of attendance,” which was awarded to a student in Nevada that met the requirements for graduation from high school or completion of an adult high school program except that the students had not passed one or more of the high school proficiency examinations or had not satisfied the alternative criteria prescribed by the State Board of Education. The “certificate of attendance” was not the equivalent of a standard diploma, advanced diploma, adjusted diploma or adult standard diploma. In 2013, the Nevada Legislature eliminated the certificate of attendance as a graduation option (Assembly Bill 288).

percent. In Washoe County School District, the 2015 graduation rate for students with disabilities was 29 percent.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 6. Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates, 2014-2015<sup>25</sup>**

	<b>All Students %</b>	<b>Students with Disabilities %</b>	<b>Gap %</b>
<b>Nevada</b>	71.3	29.0	42.3
<b>Arizona</b>	77.4	64.4	13.0
<b>California</b>	82.0	65.0	17.0
<b>Colorado</b>	77.3	53.8	23.5
<b>New Mexico</b>	68.6	59.3	9.3
<b>Texas</b>	89.0	78.2	10.8
<b>Utah</b>	84.8	67.9	16.9

As the previous tables indicate, Nevada has the lowest graduation rate among students with disabilities in the Intermountain West and is among the lowest in the United States. One of the reasons that the graduation rate for students with disabilities is alarmingly low is because the Silver State offers a second pathway – namely the adjusted diploma. The adjusted diploma provides both a pathway to graduation and an opportunity to participate in post-secondary transition programs in the school district up until the age of 22.

In the population 25 years or older, only one-third (33 percent) of students with disabilities enrolled in an institution of higher education and/or received an Associate's degree. Only 14 percent received a bachelor's degree or higher (see Table 7).

**Table 7. Educational Attainment, Population over 25 years of age, 2014<sup>26</sup>**

	<b>Nevada</b>		<b>United States</b>	
	<b>Disability</b>	<b>No Disability</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>No Disability</b>
<b>No High School Diploma</b>	21%	14%	26%	11%
<b>High School Diploma or Equivalent</b>	32%	28%	34%	27%
<b>Some College / Associate's</b>	33%	34%	26%	30%
<b>Bachelor's or Higher</b>	14%	24%	14%	32%

A review of longitudinal data from the Department of Employment, Training, and Rehabilitation's Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (DETR-BVR) confirms these trends. Briefly, DETR-BVR provides support to eligible individuals with a disability who want to pursue a post-secondary education degree or certificate program that is likely to result in competitive integrated employment. Of the open cases DETR-BVR has with youth ages 18-22 in 2016, only 18 percent requested support to pursue a post-secondary education opportunity (see Table 8). This number has declined from 2015 when 20 percent of DETR-BVR youth pursued post-secondary education opportunities.

**Table 8. Students with Disabilities who are Pursuing Post-Secondary Education Opportunity<sup>27</sup>**

<b>Federal Fiscal Year</b>	<b>(A) Total Transition Student Applications</b>	<b>(B) Open (Case) Transition Students With Post-secondary Education</b>	<b>B ÷ A = %</b>
2013	478	94	20%
2014	500	73	15%
2015	644	128	20%
2016	765	135	18%

## Post-Secondary Outcomes

Recent data reveals that post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities in Nevada are far from stellar. As reported by the University of Nevada, Reno's Path to Independence program, youth with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities "have the lowest rate of education, work, or preparation for work after high school of all disability groups."<sup>28</sup>

Table 9 presents secondary outcomes in Nevada by county. The results are cause for concern. For example, Nevada's state target was to report 84 percent of students with IEPs graduating from high school with a standard diploma. However, only Eureka County School District met that target. The two urban school districts, Clark County School District and Washoe County School District, as well as Nye County, reported that less than 30 percent of their students with IEPs graduated with a standard diploma.

Nevada set a target that 27 percent of students with IEPs would enroll in institutions of higher education (e.g., community college, research universities, state college) within one year after leaving high school. Most school districts in the Silver State (nine out of seventeen) did not meet or exceed this target. Additionally, the State set a target that 56 percent of students with an IEP in place at the time of graduation would have secured employment within one year after graduating. Nine school districts met or exceeded expectations, seven did not. Clark County School District, the state's largest urban district, did not meet this state target. Nor did Clark County School District meet the state's target that 72 percent of students with IEPs in place at the time of graduation would be enrolled in higher education, or a post-secondary training program, or competitively employed within one year after graduation.

**Table 9. Post-Secondary Educational Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Nevada, 2014-2015<sup>29</sup>**

	% youth w/IEPs graduating from high school w/ regular diploma	% youth w/ IEPs dropping out of high school	% youth (no longer enrolled in high school & had IEPs when they left school) who were enrolled in higher education w/in 1 yr of leaving high school	% youth (no longer enrolled in high school & had IEPs when they left school) who were enrolled in higher education or competitively employed w/in 1 yr of leaving high school	% youth (no longer enrolled in high school & had IEPs when they left school) who were enrolled in higher education, or post-secondary training program, or competitively employed w/in 1 yr of leaving high school
State Actual (2012)			24.0	54.0	66.0
State Target (2014-15)	83.8	5.4	27.0	56.0	72.0
Carson City	41.6	5.2	28.0	62.0	72.0
Churchill			14.0	55.0	64.0
Clark	26.2	5.2	20.0	53.0	67.0
Douglas	53.7		27.0	73.0	91.0
Elko	50.0		15.0	55.0	70.0
Esmeralda	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Eureka					
Humboldt					
Lander					
Lincoln					
Lyon	33.8	5.1	16.0	61.0	81.0
Mineral					
Nye	25.4	4.0	27.0	60.0	73.0
Pershing					
Storey					
Washoe	27.4	4.2	29.0	64.0	75.0
White Pine					

National 2015 data from the American Community Survey reveals that individuals with disabilities, and intellectual and/or developmental disabilities have lower rates of employment than individuals without disabilities (see Tables 10 and 11). For example, the employment rate of working-age (ages 21-64) individuals without disabilities is 75.9 percent, compared to only 40.7 percent for working-age individuals with disabilities (and only 33.8 percent for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (see Table 10). Similarly, full-time (full-year) employment status among working-age (ages 21-64) individuals with disabilities is lower than for individuals without disabilities (see Table 11).

**Table 10. Employment Rate of Working-age Individuals, by Disability Status, Nevada, 2015<sup>30</sup>**

Disability Type	%
No Disability	75.9
Any Disability	40.7
Visual	51.2
Hearing	55.4
Ambulatory	32.6
Intellectual	33.8
Self-Care	33.5
Independent Living	25.3

**Table 11. Full-time Employment Status of Working-age Individuals, by Disability Status, Nevada, 2015<sup>31</sup>**

Disability Type	%
No Disability	55.2
Any Disability	26.1
Visual	36.9
Hearing	36.5
Ambulatory	20.7
Intellectual	19.8
Self-Care	19.2
Independent Living	13.8

Poverty rates are higher – almost double – among individuals with disabilities (see Table 12). A study issued by the University of Nevada, Reno Path to Independence program reported that “30 percent of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities live in poverty.”<sup>32</sup> On average, these individuals make less than \$11,490 annually and \$957.50 monthly.<sup>33</sup> The same study found that students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities who attend some post-secondary education are 26 percent more likely to be employed, require fewer supports, and earn wages that are 73 percent higher than their peers who did not pursue any post-secondary education.<sup>34</sup>

**Table 12. Poverty Status of Working-age People by Disability Status, Nevada, 2015<sup>35</sup>**

Disability Type	%
No Disability	12.3
Any Disability	24.0
Visual	21.8
Hearing	18.5
Ambulatory	27.1
Intellectual	26.2
Self-Care	26.7
Independent Living	27.0

Most of the data presented in previous tables includes all students with disabilities, regardless of disability category. However, the statistics for those who are severely disabled are more dismal. Compared to their peers from all disability groups, youth with intellectual disabilities, for example, have the lowest rates of education, work, or work preparation after high school. A U.S. Department of Education study that examined post-secondary outcomes for young adults with disabilities up to six years after graduation “found fewer than half of the young adults with multiple disabilities had a paid job at the time of the survey, compared to 79 percent of young adults with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia.”<sup>36</sup>



## **Existing programs to support transition**

State agencies, school districts, and institutions of higher education around Nevada have established programs to support successful post-secondary transitions of individual with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

### **Vocational Rehabilitation**

The Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation's Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (DETR-BVR) is a "state and federally funded program designed to help people with disabilities become employed and to help those already employed perform more successfully through training, counseling and other support methods."<sup>37</sup> The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 within Title IV. These amendments signal "a renewed emphasis on providing services to transition-age students and youth with disabilities, and doing so collaboratively with education." To better prepare students with disabilities to transition from high school to post-secondary education or training/certification programs, and ultimately employment, WIOA requires the delivery of Pre-Employment Transition Services (PETS). PETS may include "job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or post-secondary educational programs, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy."<sup>38</sup> DETR-BVR must coordinate with local education agencies (LEAs) on the provision of PETS to students with disabilities.<sup>39</sup>

DETR'S Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (DETR-BVR) "has interlocal contracts with 16 of the school districts in Nevada that have high schools." DETR-BVR provides consultation and technical assistance to special education staff and has dedicated rehabilitation counselors working with students with disabilities in coordination with individual schools. DETR-BVR has increased its training and outreach to education stakeholders for the provision of PETS. DETR-BVR collaborates in the following programs: Nevada Student Leadership Transition Summit; Careers, Recreation and Vocational Education (CRAVE) camp; community-based Career Exploration camp; Project SEARCH and Job Exploration and Expectation Program (in Clark County School District), and Vocational Opportunities for Inclusive Career Education (VOICE) in Washoe County School District.

DETR-BVR also holds Third Party Cooperative Arrangements (TPCA) with Washoe County School District (WCSD), Clark County School District (CCSD), University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), Western Nevada College (WNC), College of Southern Nevada (CSN), and Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC).<sup>40</sup> TPCAs enable DETR-BVR to leverage federal funds to create (or expand) existing programs for individuals with disabilities. (Generally, the federal government supports DETR-BVR programs with a \$4 Federal match for every state dollar spent.)

Specifically, TPCAs allow the partnering organization to provide matching funds that subsequently enable DETR-BVR to draw federal grant funds that it then uses to pay for the TPCA program expenditures that serve individuals with disabilities. DETR-BVR's existing TPCA partnerships with WCSD and CCSD provide students with disabilities with vocational assessments, career development, work experiences, jobs search skills training, self-advocacy training, job development, job placement and job coaching services. DETR-BVR's TPCAs with UNLV, WNC, CSN, and TMCC, which are called "CareerConnect," provide academic

support/intensive tutoring, vocational training, hands-on work experiences including internships, assistive technology assessments, equipment and training, job exploration skills training, transportation training, job matching and job coaching” to students with disabilities (including intellectual and/or developmental disabilities).<sup>41</sup> DETR-BVR can pay for tuition, fees, and school supplies (e.g., textbooks) provided that the student will complete a degree or certificate program that is likely to lead to competitive integrated employment.

Following revisions to WIOA Title IV, there is a renewed emphasis on achievement of competitive integrated employment through customized employment, supported employment, and individualized services.<sup>42</sup>

Table 13 provides data on the number of transition students that DETR-BVR has served and the monetary value of the supported employment services it provides. As stated previously, the Guinn Center estimated that there were approximately 16,000-18,000 students with IEPs in grades 9-12 in Nevada (see Table 1), which would amount to roughly 4,000-4,500 in each grade. As such the DETR-BVR caseload reaches about 25 percent of the transition-age population that are currently in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, based on our estimate.

**Table 13. DETR-BVR Open Cases, FY2012-FY2016<sup>43</sup>**

	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016
<b>Total Open Cases</b>	1,220	940	883	1,000	1,175
<b>Total Paid</b>	\$1,156,573	\$ 924,312	\$1,201,488	\$1,015,617	\$1,031,174
<b>Paid per Case</b>	\$ 948	\$ 983	\$ 1,361	\$ 1,016	\$ 878

## Regional Centers, Aging and Disability Services Division

Currently, there are several state agencies within Nevada that provide long-term support to transition-age students with disabilities that have been identified and meet the criteria for supported employment. Depending on a participant’s severity of intellectual disability, participants are referred to one of three community agencies for services: Desert Regional Center (Clark County, Nevada); Sierra Regional Center (Washoe County, Nevada) and rural Regional Centers (Carson City, Gardnerville, Fallon, Winnemucca, and Elko). The Regional Centers are state agencies (part of the Aging and Disability Services Division of the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services). The Regional Centers serve children and adults who have a diagnosis of intellectual disability or closely related developmental disabilities. Regional Centers provide “accessible services and service coordination that offer supports to people that reflect their personal choice and desires. Services, choices, and opportunities will focus on best practices, community integration, family supports, and employment.”<sup>44</sup>

To be eligible for services, students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities must have a documented diagnosis of intellectual disability (or a closely related condition such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, or other neurological impairment that is a developmental disability occurring prior to age 22 years) (Nevada Revised Statute 435.010, 435.020, 435.030).<sup>45</sup> In addition, eligible students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities must have substantial limitations in adaptive functioning, including communication, self-care, independent living, and self-direction. A service coordinator will help each student develop a support plan and individualized plan for employment (IPE) based upon the

student's interest, goals, and abilities. Regional Centers provide the following services: family support (including self-directed family support arrangement, family preservation program, purchase of service, and respite), job placement services, psychological services, vocational training, adaptive skill development, and community living arrangements.<sup>46</sup>

Specifically, Regional Centers offer the following waiver covered services that support transition:

1. Supported Living Arrangements: Residential Support and Residential Support Management
2. Jobs and Day Training: Day Habilitation, Pre-Vocational, Supported Employment and Career Planning
3. Specialized Services: Behavioral Consultation, Training and Intervention, Non-medical transportation, Nursing, Nutritional Counseling, and Counseling

## **Local Education Agencies**

### **Individualized Education Program**

IDEA requires that every student receiving special education services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which guarantees the FAPE. As the student progresses, the IEP must include a transition plan that identifies the path toward adulthood. The transition plan should be student focused and reflect his (her) choices, preferences, interests, and needs in the areas of education and training, employment, adult living arrangements, and community experiences. IDEA requires that the IEP team begin no later than age 16 to address the student's needs that will assist him (her) in preparing for transition, but transition planning can begin as early as 14.<sup>47</sup> The IEP "must include a statement of the student's transition service needs that focuses on the student's course of study (such as advanced academic courses, technical training, or intensive employment preparation)." <sup>48</sup> The IEP team, in identifying annual goals and services for a student, must determine what instruction and educational experiences will help the student prepare for the transition to adult life, and, as appropriate, should include a statement of interagency responsibilities. It should also include measurable goals and outcomes and indicate how planned activities are linked to goals and outcomes. The IEP must be updated annually and can be revised should the student not demonstrate expected progress toward the annual goals.<sup>49</sup>

### **Clark County School District**

There are several programs provided by Nevada school districts to students with disabilities that aim to facilitate post-secondary success. Collectively, these programs serve a wide spectrum of ability to meet the distinct needs of transition-age students seeking employment and vocational training. Transition programs range from social skill development to structured higher education programs. Through various experiences and varied program design, students build their understanding of life after high school and acquire an understanding of how to navigate the workforce landscape.

Options such as enclave, supported, and competitive integrated workplace environments accommodate the unique needs of transition-age students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Supported employee services can vary from small group enclave environments to adapted employment

to assist workers with completing tasks. Students familiarize themselves with these resources through the transition programs offered by Clark County School District (CCSD). Specifically, CCSD has seven programs to support students with disabilities, including intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (see Table 14 for a summary of the programs offered by CCSD). Combined, these programs serve approximately 500 students with IEPs that are in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, through graduation, and up to age 22. Transition programs are typically non-credit bearing and available to students who have completed 4-5 years of high school. Participating students must also be in pursuit of or have received an adjusted diploma based on their course of study. For some of the programs, transportation is provided.

In 2015, CCSD, in partnership with DETR-BVR through a Third-Party Cooperative Arrangement, launched the Job Exploration and Expectation Program (JEEP). Under this program, which is being piloted in eight schools, students participate in work rotations in various departments of the school before moving to their final placement in a community setting. Participants rotate every nine weeks through the sites that they are interested in until they culminate into the community-based assessment experience. Part of this training includes activities under pre-employment transition services (PETS).

Job Discovery 1 (JDPI) and Job Discovery 2 (JDPII) are transition programs executed through a partnership between CCSD, DETR-BVR, and Opportunity Village, a non-profit serving adults with intellectual disabilities through vocational training, community employment, and small group enclave workplace experiences. In JDPI, Opportunity Village provides supervised, small group enclave workplace experiences in which students rotate job sites every 9-10 weeks.

The Post-Secondary Opportunities for Students in Transition (POST) program is a work-centered service that draws heavily from a student's goals in his (her) IEP. This transition option is heavily supervised and seeks to teach life skills, including vocational, community, and recreation skills. POST assists students in gaining independence and competence in areas of employment, socialization, and independent living skills with minimal support and/or assistance. Participating students must have or plan to have a case with DETR-BVR. Transportation support is based on need as determined by the IEP team.

The Program Approach to Career Education (PACE) program is geared towards students with disabilities who are interested in building maintenance or culinary arts, are on track to graduate with an adjusted diploma, and who have (or plan to open) a case with DETR-BVR or the Desert Regional Center.<sup>50</sup>

Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a unique, business led, one year school-to-work program that takes place entirely in a workplace setting. The program is a combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training through worksite rotations. Through Project SEARCH, students learn relevant, marketable skills while immersed in the business. Project SEARCH internship placements include Sunrise Hospital in Las Vegas, NV, along with the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada (RTC) and University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). The program also educates businesses on the benefits of hiring students with disabilities.

The Your Educational Success (YES) program is designed to help 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students with disabilities “make the transition from high school to a post-secondary educational setting.” Students who attend the YES program will earn three College of Southern Nevada credits and one-half CCSD high school elective credit. Topics covered in the YES program include self-advocacy, and study habits.

**Table 14. CCSD Transition Programs for Students with Disabilities<sup>51</sup>**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Skill Level</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Transportation</b>
<b>JEEP (Job Exploration and Expectation Program)</b>	Work-Center to Competitive Employment	Work in on-campus departments. Pre-employment training skills provided. 36 students enrolled.	Student accesses same mode of transportation used to travel to high school.
<b>POST (Postsecondary Opportunities for Students in Transition)</b>	Work-Center to Competitive Employment	IEP driven program with heavy supervision to teach life skills. 148 students enrolled.	Transportation based on student's needs as determined by IEP team. Students typically require curb-to-curb.
<b>JDPI (Job Discovery I)</b>	Enclave-Working in a Group	Program emphasizes career and independence. 111 enrolled in JDPI and JDPII.	Transportation based on student's needs as determined by IEP team. Students typically require curb-to-curb.
<b>PACE (Program Approach to Career Education)</b>	Supportive and Competitive Employment	Program emphasizes career and independence. 139 students enrolled.	Transportation based on student's needs as determined by IEP team. Students typically require curb-to-curb.
<b>JDPII (Job Discovery II)</b>	Guidance and support during employment (e.g., job coach)	For students requiring less supervision than POST/JDPI. 111 enrolled in JDPI and JDPII.	Transportation based on student's needs as determined by IEP team. Students use CCSD bus stop near home.
<b>Project SEARCH</b>	Competitive	Students must interview for positions and be able to work independently. 30 students enrolled, 3 locations.	Students are given bus passes and trained to use public transportation.
<b>YES (Your Educational Success)</b>	College bound juniors and seniors	Geared towards helping students transition to college or vocational school.	No transportation is provided.

## **Elko County School District**

Recently, Elko County School District implemented a Comprehensive Life Skills (CLS) class for students with disabilities which teaches life skills including vocational, community, and recreation skills. This series of classes is supported by DETR-BVR, as part of the pre-employment transition services (PETS) requirement.

## **Lyon County School District**

National programs, such as Project SEARCH, are not available in rural areas of the Silver State. Faced with limited resources, Nevada's rural districts are developing innovative ways to strengthen pathways for transition-age students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Lyon County School District, for example, is successfully transitioning one secondary school student with an intellectual and/or developmental disability and one student with a severe learning disability through its Career and Technical Education (CTE) program in health sciences. Both students are progressing successfully through the program (and one has some of the highest grades in the program). To support the students, the special education teacher at Dayton High School paired each student with a program paraprofessional who

provided intensive tutoring and academic support to help students complete their CTE coursework (see Text Box, page 31). Additionally, Dayton High School has started a business for its students with IEPs, which provides on-site job training in both workplace readiness skills and soft skills.

### **Washoe County School District**

Washoe County School District (WCSD) has a single program for students with disabilities called, Vocational Opportunities for Inclusive Career Education (VOICE). The VOICE program, in which 85 students participated in 2015-2016, is a partnership between WCSD and DETR-BVR. The goal of the program is to provide job related and transition skill development and training (e.g., career coaching, skills development, life skills, and independent living skills) that prepares students to secure competitive integrated employment. As part of the program, participating students interact with local employers, “who provide them job shadowing opportunities and hands-on work assessments.”<sup>52</sup> Pre-employment training services (PETS) classes are offered at three high schools in WCSD. WCSD also has the alternative high school, Innovations High School, which has seats for 160 high school students, some of which have intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

## **Institutions of Higher Education**

The Nevada System of Higher Education’s institutions also boast programs to support students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities transition from high school to post-secondary degree and certificate programs.

### **College of Southern Nevada**

The College of Southern Nevada (CSN) Disability Resource Center (DRC) provides several services for students with disabilities including but not limited to classroom and testing accommodations.<sup>53</sup> CSN works closely with the Clark County School District (CCSD) on several programs and interventions. For example, students enrolled in CCSD’s YES program receive one-half CCSD high school elective credit, and three CSN credits. Additionally, CSN and CCSD are exploring innovative ways to more strategically disseminate information about community college and post-secondary opportunities (e.g., degree and certificate programs) among students with disabilities. In December 2015, CSN sponsored a college night for students with disabilities and their parents to discuss relevant topics for students considering post-secondary opportunities. More than 50 students attended the event where they learned about the college application process, financial aid, individual development accounts, and support services at CSN. CSN plans to hold the event again in early 2017.

### **Truckee Meadows Community College**

The Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC) Disability Resource Center (DRC) offers services to support its students with disabilities. Among these are: academic advising, tutoring referrals, and classroom and testing accommodations. TMCC DRC counselors work with students to articulate employment goals and provides intensive tutoring services. Students registered with TMCC’s DRC can access “CareerConnect,” launched in 2015, which is supported through a TPCA with DETR-BVR.



CareerConnect helps eligible TMCC students work closely with professional counselors to develop and implement personalized educational plans. CareerConnect counselors coach students “in academic success strategies, while coordinating with Assistive Technology Specialists and career counselors to maximize each participant’s ability to be successful.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Western Nevada College**

Western Nevada College (WNC) Disability Support Services Office provides support services to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who are attending at least one WNC class, and have an open case with DETR-BVR can apply for assistance and will be referred to CareerConnect. DRC staff work closely with DETR-BVR counselors throughout the referral, eligibility, planning, and follow-up processes to ensure coordinated service provision will lead to successful employment outcomes for the students.<sup>55 56</sup>

### **University of Nevada, Reno**

The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) has a program called Path to Independence (P2I), formerly known as Think College, which offers a two-year, non-degree certificate program and college experience to students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Path to Independence is a collaborative effort among UNR's Nevada Center for Excellence in Disabilities (NCED), the University of Nevada Reno Extended Studies Department, Sierra Regional Center, Northern Nevada Center for Independent Living, and DETR-BVR. Each student in P2I participates in Person-Centered-Planning (PCP) each semester. The plan determines the level and direction of academic involvement. The STAR (Students Transitioning to Adult Roles) planning process is used, which includes the areas of academic enrichment, independent living, self-determination/self-advocacy, campus and community engagement, and career development and employment. For example, students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities can strengthen their independent living skills by taking classes in cooking, financial literacy and management, resume writing, and soft skills. DETR-BVR may only pay for services and program supports that may lead to competitive integrated employment.

### **University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

Launched in 2013, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas’ F.O.C.U.S. (Forming Occupational and Community Understanding for Success) post-secondary program provides a pathway for college and/or career for students with intellectual disabilities (and autism). Specifically, F.O.C.U.S. is a 2- to 4-year post-secondary education program for young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities including autism. F.O.C.U.S. uses the principles of the Universal Design for Learning and Person Centered Planning (PCP) to provide an inclusive program to help college students with disabilities achieve academic, independent living, and employment goals. The program includes general core classes, job track experiences, and supervised work studies. Students enrolled in F.O.C.U.S. participate in several fully inclusive college courses, work in career internships, and inclusive social activities. F.O.C.U.S. support services include: tutoring, behavioral supports, supplies and materials, internship/mentorship programs, and assistive technology. Completion of F.O.C.U.S. culminates in an Occupational and Career for Life Studies Certificate, offered through UNLV and its Department of Continuing Education. Current enrollment is 20 students.

***A passionate teacher building pathways one idea at a time***

Since arriving at Dayton High School in Lyon County School District three years ago, C.J. Fields has not stopped looking for ways to improve programming and build meaningful pathways for his students with disabilities. A passionate young man who blends in easily with the bustling halls of the high school, Fields is accustomed to being greeted with skepticism when he presents his ideas or advocates for specific supported employment service for his students. But he takes his role as an educator and advocate for his students seriously and remains undeterred.

In a rural community, it can be difficult to find employers who are willing to provide work-based learning experiences or internships for students, especially those who have intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. But Fields decided that rather than waste valuable time trying to engage a local employer, he would take matters into his own hands and help the students start their own business. In 2013-2014, the students, with assistance from Fields, opened the Dust Devil Cafe, which serves light breakfast fare to Dayton High School teachers and staff on site. As they rotate through various positions, students learn customer service skills, management skills, financial skills (counting money, budget/accounting), and trade skills (food preparation). The business has grown: in the first year, the students offered coffee, tea, and hot chocolate only. This year, they added bagels to the menu.

Upon his arrival, Fields also noted that expectations of the school's students with low incidence disabilities were low and that existing resources were not being leveraged to provide high quality pathways to Dayton High School students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to prepare them for life after high school. After gauging the interest of two of his students, he encouraged them to participate in the Dayton High School's Career and Technical Education (CTE) Nursing Assistant program of study. Initially, the idea was met with some skepticism, but Fields was persistent. Fields paired a program paraprofessional with the students who then attended CTE classes with the students and provided them intensive tutoring support. Fields as well collaborated with the school's CTE health science teachers and school nurse and developed a staggered curriculum to meet the individual learning needs of the students. Fields' students are successfully completing the CTE program and expectations are for them to successfully pass their Nevada State Board of Nursing Certifying Exam for Nursing Assistants this school year.

Despite offers to move to urban districts or to move into administration, Fields is content in the classroom working with students to prepare them for life as adults. Fields is currently working on his doctoral degree in special education and disability studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. His long-term career goals are to either work in higher education preparing future special education teachers or in a state level leadership role focused on transitioning students with disabilities into the workplace and their local communities.



## **Barriers Faced by Students with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities**

In 2016, the Guinn Center researchers conducted focus groups and interviews around the state with students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, families, local education agency officials, and representatives from state agencies, non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and higher education. Primary and secondary research and analysis suggests that there are significant barriers that exist, which prevent students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities from accessing and moving along college and/or career pathways to prepare them for adult life beyond high school. Academics often refer to these sets of barriers as the ‘disability cliff.’ As Samuel Bagenstos writes:

“Yet once they age out of special education—usually at 22—many young adults with developmental disabilities find a reality that is very different from the one they had gotten used to. When they lose their federal entitlement to special education, they are thrown into an underfunded and uncoordinated system in which few services are available as a matter of right. They must now contend with services from a variety of providers, financed by a variety of agencies, most of which are not sufficiently funded to cover everyone, and many of which are far too bureaucratic and insufficiently focused on ensuring that their clients can spend meaningful days integrated in community life. They fall, in other words, off the cliff.”<sup>57</sup>

Like their peers around the country, students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in Nevada face a disability cliff. The following barriers facing students as they attempt to access and move along high quality pathways to post-secondary opportunities are consistently reported by teachers, parents, and students.

### **Families Face Informational Barriers**

Policy makers believe parental engagement is critical to a student’s educational success and ultimate transition to adulthood. As part of the IDEA required State Performance Plan that describes how the state will implement the requirements of the IDEA and improve results for students with disabilities, states must report on parental engagement. This is measured as the ‘percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities.’<sup>58</sup>

When interviewed, most students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities expressed satisfaction with their experience in secondary schools in Nevada. However, others voiced concern that they were unable to pursue the coursework and curriculum that interested them. Very few recalled conversations with their IEP team about career and technical education programs at their high schools or about post-secondary opportunities in higher education (e.g., at the community college, certificate and/or degree programs).

The parents and guardians of students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities voiced widespread concerns about the quality and availability of meaningful transition pathways and services available to their children with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. The lack of information

about their rights under IDEA and about available services, and the inability to access services and programs were among the primary concerns voiced by parents (guardians). Specific concerns include:

- Limited understanding of one's rights under IDEA and the IEP process (this concern was even more prominent among parents for whom English is not their first language)
- Absence of meaningful discussion (and follow up) of transition planning in IEP team meetings
- Difficulty obtaining information from local education agencies (school districts) and IEP teams about available transition-related services and programs
- Feeling pressured by school district officials to waive the right to have their student re-evaluated
- Concern that available programs do not meet the needs (or interests) of their transition-age students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities
- Difficulty obtaining information about programs and services offered by government agencies (particularly the Regional Centers), and difficulty effectively navigating those agencies
- Long waiting times (months) to access services (especially at the Regional Centers)
- Lack of follow up by state agencies (Regional Centers and DETR-BVR)
- Case managers and vocational rehabilitation counselors do not have sufficient time and resources to provide individualized attention and identify programs and opportunities that align with students' interests.
- Case managers seem more interested in closing cases promptly at the expense of taking the time to find programs and opportunities that meet the students' interests, preferences, and skills.
- Lack of services, support, and job placement opportunities available for young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, *especially in rural communities*
- Multiple assessments for their transition-age youth and the lack of meaningful community based assessments
- Concern that job placements do not align with transition-age student's interests
- Concern that state agencies are not providing appropriate training (e.g., coaching, soft skills) to increase the probability that their youth with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities will be able to retain their jobs
- The absence of meaningful pathways resulting in post-secondary degree/training programs and/or meaningful careers

## **School District Barriers**

### **1. Limited supply of special education teachers**

Across Nevada, school districts struggle with special education teacher vacancies. As of May 2016, 38 percent of teacher vacancies in the Clark County School District's elementary and middle schools were special education vacancies, and many of these are for autism specialists.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, 83 percent of special education teacher vacancies were in Title I schools, which serve the State's community's most under-resourced families.<sup>60</sup> Special education teacher vacancies are also high in schools tailored to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. This crisis in the supply of special education instructors is

not limited to the Clark County School District. As of November 2016, more than 40 percent of teacher vacancies in Washoe County School District were for special education instructors and/or specialists.

In the face of chronic shortages of special education teachers, long-term substitutes must fill in as special education teachers. While they can write an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a student receiving special education services, they do not have the appropriate training to understand the transition needs of students. Reports suggest that in many instances, IEPs are not being followed or implemented with fidelity.<sup>61</sup> Long-term substitutes are not required to attend professional development opportunities offered by the district, which could provide some training to help them meet students' diverse needs.

Consequently, valuable resources are being used to triage the lack of training. For example, the Clark County School District has senior-level special education experts such as area directors, instructional coordinators, and behavior interventionist project facilitators who are available to help school staff address the needs of students receiving special education services. In Clark County, these experts train Special Education Instructional Facilitators (SEIFs) at the school site to help special education teachers and provide them with guidance and support. Unfortunately, due to long-term substitutes' lack of training, SEIFs spend most of their time writing IEPs to ensure legal compliance rather than providing support to special education teachers.<sup>62</sup> The lack of qualified classroom instructors threatens the federal and state requirements to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. This shortfall also puts strain on special education teachers that must manage at-capacity caseloads and overcrowded classrooms. Thus, high school students are not likely to receive the appropriate level of attention in developing and monitoring their IEP and transition plan.

## **2. Limited numbers of transition specialists**

School districts in both rural and urban counties have limited numbers of transition specialists on staff to support the IEP and transition planning of secondary school students. The role of the transition specialist is to work closely with the student to develop the post-secondary transition plan, discuss the student's interests, and identify relevant and appropriate opportunities that meet the student's interests, goals, and plans. Ideally, transition specialists might also play role in identifying potential employers, making new contacts, and building (and maintaining) relationships with employers (and community groups).

Clark County School District, for example, has 10-15 transition specialists to serve thousands of secondary school students with IEPs.<sup>e</sup> Each transition specialist has responsibility for working with students at 5-8 high schools in the district. Other districts, including Washoe County School District, may have only one transition specialist; some rural districts do not have a single transition specialist on staff.

## **3. Special education facilitators and transition specialists have limited knowledge of available programs and opportunities**

Policy leaders and advocacy groups express concern that special education facilitators, required members of the IEP team (and who tend to be the local education agency (LEA) designee), have limited knowledge and understanding of transition and available and appropriate programs and opportunities. One high

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<sup>e</sup> Guinn Center estimates that there are 12,333 secondary school students with IEPs, based on the total special education enrollment of 37,000 in CCSD.

school special education teacher reported that she did not receive any guidance or training from the special education facilitator on how to address transition in her students' IEPs. Reports indicate that there is little integration of the transition specialist in IEP meetings and that participation is not consistent.

Parents and advocates expressed concern that transition specialists are “not exploring [post-secondary] options.” Research suggests that transition specialists (and school district officials) do not have complete knowledge of the full range of programs and opportunities available to secondary students with intellectual disabilities in the community. The heavy caseload of the transition specialists (and school district officials) may prevent transition specialists from spending time in the community learning about the resources and programs that are available. Moreover, because of their heavy caseload, transition specialists are not able frequently to provide sufficient attention to individualized transition plans. Consequently, parents and advocates expressed concern that high school students are simply receiving a one-size-fits-all transition plan and that the same transition plan is being used every year.

#### **4. Limited programs to prepare students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities for post-secondary opportunities**

Across Nevada in both rural and urban districts, transition programs for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities are limited in supply. By our estimate, transition programs in the State's two urban districts serve *less than ten percent* of secondary students with IEPs.

Additionally, school districts are not able to provide sufficient programming for the range of ability among students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. For example, in Elko County School District, the school district recently launched its Comprehensive Life Skills class, a PETS class, which is offered to students who are higher functioning. District officials acknowledged that they do not currently offer a program or curriculum for students who have more severe intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. In contrast, most of the transition programming for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in Clark County School District is geared toward students who have severe to moderate intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. District officials acknowledged that there is a gap in programming and services for higher functioning high school students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

In some instances, innovative individuals in (rural) school districts have piloted new transition-focused programs for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. While these programs are much needed, their long-term sustainability is uncertain.

Representatives from non-profits and service providers shared that most of the high school graduates they work with have no work-based experience or job skills. (This is not surprising given our estimate that less than ten percent of students with IEPs participate in school district-sponsored transition programs). The lack of work experience for most students is troubling given the robust body of research indicating that “paid work during the secondary school years has been consistently shown to be the strongest predictor of post-secondary employment success for youth with disabilities, regardless of disability label or intensity of special education services.”<sup>63</sup>

## **5. Inconsistent and/or insufficient focus on transitions within required IEP**

IDEA requires that each student with an identified disability have an individualized education plan (IEP) and that that “the IEP team begin no later than age 14 to address the student's need for instruction that will assist him or her in preparing for transition.”<sup>64</sup> Our research reveals, however, that transition planning does not appear to begin in meaningful ways until the 12<sup>th</sup> year of high school.

Advocates and parents shared that IEPs are not using Person-Centered-Planning frameworks and that the IEP transition planning process is focused on compliance rather than developing measurable outcomes which align to the courses and interventions identified for the student. Again, systemic challenges -- the lack of transition specialists, high numbers of special education teacher vacancies, the use of long-term substitutes who are not appropriately trained, and insufficient resources -- result in the widespread failure of early and meaningful transition planning for students with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

Parents also shared that they are discouraged frequently by instructional staff and school district officials from requesting assessments for their high school student. Many parents felt pressured to waive the right to have their high school student re-assessed. And since they do not fully understand their rights, they do not understand what assessments and services they can ask the district to provide.

## **6. Lack of school level and district level leadership**

There are a limited number of transition programs for secondary school students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities that meet the full spectrum of needs. And yet, under WIOA's new requirements, students with disabilities are eligible to receive extensive pre-employment transition services, and state vocational rehabilitation agencies are mandated now to set aside at least 15 percent of federal funding to provide transition services to students with disabilities.

Interviews with stakeholders indicate that efforts to pilot and/or expand existing transition programs have been met with resistance by school site leadership teams and by school district officials. State agency representatives in the State's urban school districts reported that the decision to pilot or expand an existing transition program for students with disabilities depends on the school leadership team. Some schools, they report, do not have a relationship with DETR-BVR or the Regional Centers and do not give referrals for DETR-BVR services to their students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.<sup>65</sup> Efforts to pilot transition programs or expand existing programs have been slow and difficult, according to representatives from agencies and non-profits. However, several representatives from state and local education agencies noted that some teachers at high school sites stopped referring students to DETR-BVR due to a lack of follow up by the agency with the students.

Table 15 summarizes the number of DETR-BVR transition student applications (from students age 18-22) it has received over the period 2013-2016. In 2016, it received 765 applications from students (18-22 years old). Given that the possible universe of secondary students with IEPs in 2015-2016 could be as high as 18,000 students, participation in DETR-BVR programs is significantly low.

**Table 15. Transition Student Applications Received by DETR-BVR, 2013-2016<sup>66</sup>**

<b>Federal Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Total Transition Student Applications</b>
2013	478
2014	500
2015	644
2016	765

In addition, stakeholders commented on the absence of leadership at the district level leadership – particularly in the State’s two urban districts – that prioritizes transition planning and the development of robust and meaningful post-secondary pathways for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.<sup>67</sup> Given the new WIOA requirements, there is a missed opportunity to leverage resources to expand and strengthen meaningful transition programs for students with disabilities.

One of the few exceptions is Lyon County School District which has prioritized interventions and resources to address the needs of its special education students. Briefly, 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.<sup>68</sup> Lyon County School District remains the only district to use their performance pay funds to attract and retain special education teachers. Despite limited resources, Dayton High School special education teachers are leveraging CTE programs and creating in-house job training experiences to develop meaningful pathways for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

Finally, stakeholders across the State bemoan the general lack of accountability in the K-12 public education system for post-secondary transition outcomes for students with disabilities. Several commented that the system continues to have low expectations for students with disabilities. The lack of adequate resources and transition programming reflects the low expectations held by the system.

## **7. Transportation barriers**

Transportation continues to be a barrier to a student’s ability to access work-based experiences. Transportation is not provided for work-based experiences and transition programs that are not school-based, although DETR-BVR can provide bus passes and gas cards while the student’s case with DETR-BVR is open. As such, families must bear the responsibility of transporting their transition-age youth with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to work-based experiences. For example, the YES program, a partnership between CSN and CCSD, does not provide transportation; students are responsible for getting to one of the three CSN locations.

In rural districts, transportation is even more challenging. Stakeholders report that often transition-age students (and families) who live in rural areas do not follow up on employment services and/or miss appointments because they do not have transportation to get to job sites or programs.

## **8. Limited resources**

Across the State, stakeholders share concerns that there are insufficient resources to adequately support students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and expand and strengthen pathways that prepare them for competitive integrated employment, higher education degree/certificate programs, or other meaningful opportunities. School district officials state that they do not have sufficient resources to hire more transition specialists. DETR-BVR also has finite resources, and its federal grant is not fully matched by the state. Across Nevada, the demand for Regional Center (e.g. Desert Regional Center in southern Nevada) supported employment services exceeds the supply and waiting lists remain long. By law, the Regional Centers can only have a certain number of people on their ‘waiting lists.’ But interviews suggest that actual demand is double the number of individuals on the official waiting list.

The lack of fiscal support and human capital resources is even more acute in the rural areas of Nevada. In White Pine County, for example, DETR-BVR must send transition-age youth with disabilities to Las Vegas (or Elko) to complete their community based assessment. There are fewer employers or internship opportunities available for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in rural areas.

In 2015, the Nevada State Legislature passed two measures that seek to modernize the Nevada Plan or the way the State funds K-12 public education. First, the Legislature will add special education weights.<sup>f</sup> While the initiative will not take effect until 2017, special education units will be converted to an equivalent per pupil “weighted” formula. This will begin an increase in weighted formula funding over each year of until the desired weight (estimated to be twice the basic per pupil guarantee) is achieved. The cost of this measure is \$25 million. Second, the State approved the establishment of a special education contingency account (valued at \$5 million) which can be used to reimburse districts and charter schools for extraordinary expenses relate to the education of students with disabilities.

## **Nevada Department of Education Barriers**

### **1. Adjusted diploma**

As discussed previously, Nevada offers several types of diplomas: advanced, standard, adult standard, and adjusted. In 2014-2015, only 31.2 percent of students with disabilities graduate with a standard diploma. A significant number of students with disabilities graduate with an adjusted diploma. In 2015-2016, Nevada 883 students with disabilities received a standard diploma, reflecting a graduation rate of 21.5

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<sup>f</sup> Up until the 2015, special education was funded using a “unit” structure. Units aimed to represent the number of teachers necessary based on the needs of special education students and, years ago, unit funding was approximately the cost of a teacher. Unfortunately, over time, the per-unit amount has not kept pace with teacher costs and currently covers about half the cost of a teacher. In 2015, the Legislature enacted SB 508, which eliminated the unit funding method and replaced it with a weighted formula. The bill tasked the State Superintendent with developing weights that “meet the unique needs” of special education students, along with other student populations. The K-12 Task Force on Public Education Funding estimated special education students needed a weight of 2.0, meaning each special education student would receive double the amount of a general education students. For example, if the district received \$5,700 per pupil, a special education student should receive \$11,400.



percent. And 890 adjusted diplomas were issued, primarily to students identified with Specific Learning Disabilities.<sup>69</sup>

Data from Lyon County School District reveals that in four out of the last five school years, more students with disabilities graduated with an adjusted diploma than with a standard diploma (see Table 16). In White Pine County School District, there is considerable year-over-year variation. In 2014-2015, only 41.7 percent of students with IPEs graduated with an adjusted diploma; however, in 2015-2016, 81.8 percent of students graduated with an adjusted diploma (see Table 16). In Elko County School District, of the 79 students with IEPs who graduated in 2015-2016, 62 percent graduated with a standard diploma, 32 percent graduated with an adjusted diploma, and 6 percent did not graduate. Clark County School District reported that 476 students graduated with an adjusted diploma in 2016.

**Table 16. Adjusted diplomas awarded versus standard diplomas, two school districts<sup>70</sup>**

School Year	Standard/ Advanced Diploma	Adjusted Diploma	Total	Adjusted Diplomas as % of Total Diplomas
<b>Lyon County School District</b>				
2015-2016	15	22	37	59.5%
2014-2015	9	28	37	75.7%
2013-2014	20	25	45	55.6%
2012-2013	31	41	72	56.9%
2011-2012	39	33	72	45.8%
5 Year Trend	114	149	263	56.7%
<b>White Pine County School District</b>				
2015-2016	2	9	11	81.8%
2014-2015	7	5	12	41.7%

In recent months, Nevada Department of Education (NDE) officials have acknowledged that the value proposition of the adjusted diploma is limited. As critics point out, an adjusted diploma is not the equivalent of a high school diploma and students who graduate with an adjusted diploma cannot enlist in some branches of the military or apply for Federal financial aid. Additionally, some employers in Nevada will not recognize an adjusted diploma for admittance into their training programs. Forty of the fifty states in the United States have eliminated a different pathway – e.g., an adjusted diploma – for students with disabilities.<sup>71</sup> NDE is currently exploring ways to revise the existing system so that the State can provide students with meaningful, high-value technical and academic pathways in secondary school that will result in meaningful post-secondary opportunities.

## **2. Career and Technical Education enrollment**

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, which provide hands-on learning experiences, are available in 15 of Nevada's 17 school districts. Currently, the Nevada Department of Education has 6 program areas of study (Agricultural and Natural Resources, Business and Marketing Education, Education, Hospitality and Human Services, Health Science and Public Safety, Information and Media Technologies, and Skilled and Technical Sciences) and 76 programs.<sup>72</sup>



Research demonstrates “positive outcomes for students who take CTE courses. Involvement in these programs results in students being twice as likely to obtain full-time jobs after high school than students not involved. CTE program involvement also results in higher pay and a higher high school graduation rate.”<sup>73</sup> In Nevada, students who participate in CTE programs have graduation rates that are 14 percent higher on average than students who do not participate in CTE programs.<sup>74</sup>

Historically, students with IEPs were overrepresented in CTE programs. However, over the past 10-20 years, participation in CTE programs has declined around the country and in Nevada by all student groups. As Table 17 reveals, CTE participation among students with IEPs is lower than their representation in the general population: 11.8 percent of K-12 public school students have an IEP, but only 8.4 percent of CTE students have an IEP. CTE enrollment in Nevada (8.4 percent) by students with IEPs is lower than the national average (10 percent). And it is lower than previous years: in 2002-2003, students with disabilities comprised 14 percent of the students who participate in these CTE courses.<sup>75</sup>

Given the curriculum and its association with better academic outcomes, CTE programs could serve as a valuable resource and pathway option for students with intellectual disabilities. The recent experience in Lyon County School District, for example, underscores the opportunities CTE programs present to expand and strengthen post-secondary pathways for students with intellectual disabilities.

Finally, it is relevant to note in this section once again that stakeholders express frustration with the general lack of accountability in the K-12 public education system for post-secondary transition outcomes for students with disabilities. As illustrated in Table 9 (page 22), existing pathways in Nevada do not appear to be preparing students with disabilities for life beyond high school. Less than one-third of students with IEPs in Clark, Nye, and Washoe County School Districts graduate with a standard diploma. And very few pursue degree or certificate programs at institutions of higher education within one year of graduating.

**Table 17. CTE enrollment data, 2014-2015<sup>76</sup>**

A	Students with IEPs in K-12	54,312
B	Students with IEPs as % of Total Enrollment	11.8%
C	Students with IEPs enrolled in CTE	4,750
D	Students with IEPs as % of Total CTE Enrollment	8.4%
E	# of CTE concentrators with IEPs who took end-of-program (EOP) assessment	185
F	% of CTE concentrators with IEPs who took end-of-program (EOP) assessment (E/C)	4.0%
G	# of CTE concentrators with IEPs who passed EOP assessment	43
H	% of CTE concentrators with IEPs who passed EOP assessment (as a % who took EOP assessment) (G/E)	23.2%
I	# of CTE concentrators with IEPs who earn diploma w/ CTE endorsement & earn college credit	40
J	% of CTE concentrators with IEPs who earn diploma w/ CTE endorsement (as % of CTE concentrators who take EOP assessment) & earn college credit (I/E)	21.6%
K	CTE Post-secondary Enrollment by CTE students with IEPs	469
L	As % of Total CTE Post-secondary Enrollment	1.8%

## **Post-secondary Transition Barriers**

### **1. Informational barriers**

Interviews with individuals, self-advocates, families, and stakeholders revealed that high school students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and their families do not often consider post-secondary pathways that lead to higher education – either at community college or a four-year university program. Older students shared that none of their counselors or IEP team members had ever discussed the possibility of attending college when they were enrolled in high school.

### **2. Limited financial resources**

Resource limitations may restrict the ability of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities from pursuing post-secondary education (e.g., degree and/or certificate program). At the inaugural college night sponsored by the College of Southern Nevada for Clark County School District students with IEPs and their families in December 2015, attendance exceeded expectations. During the event, several parents revealed that they were unprepared financially to support their young transition-age youth because they had never considered pursuing a post-secondary pathway leading to a degree and/or certificate program at community college, and had thus not set aside funds to pay for college. DETR-BVR's performance outcomes revealed that very few of DETR-BVR's transition-age students pursue post-secondary pathways to higher education (see Table 8, page 21).

DETR-BVR can provide support for no more than 2 years “except that period may be extended as necessary, in order to achieve the employment outcome in the individual’s IPE.”<sup>77</sup> Because a significant number of secondary students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities graduate with an adjusted diploma, they are ineligible for federal financial aid, such as a Pell Grant, which requires a standard diploma or general education development (GED).

### **3. Transportation barriers**

Transportation poses a barrier for many students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities who are pursuing post-secondary opportunities at institutions of higher education. Students enrolled in the Path to Independence program at the University of Nevada Reno or in F.O.C.U.S. at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, for example, are responsible for their own transportation. Many students shared that they avoid using public transportation due to personal safety concerns; as such, they must rely on family members to transport them to school.

## **State Agency Barriers**

### **1. Limited outreach from agencies**

Families have limited knowledge and understanding of DETR-BVR and the Regional Centers (e.g., Desert Regional Center, Sierra Regional Center, Rural Regional Center) and the supported employment services that transition-age students and youth with disabilities are eligible to receive.

Stakeholders around the State revealed that the Regional Centers do not conduct outreach or hold information sessions at high schools. Several families reported that they have experienced significant delays in accessing services from the Regional Centers because they did not receive information about eligibility requirements. Recent revisions to Section 511 of WIOA now require transition-age youth to determine eligibility through the State's vocational rehabilitation agency before they can secure employment that pays subminimum wage. Specifically, as of July 22, 2016:

"Before a youth with a disability who is 24 or under starts subminimum wage employment, they must: (a) Receive either pre-employment transition services from their vocational rehabilitation agency or transition services under IDEA from their school; (b) Be determined ineligible for vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, or be accepted for VR services and be unsuccessful in achieving an employment outcome after a reasonable period of time; and (c) Receive career counseling and information and referrals from the VR agency to programs and other resources in the local area that offer employment-related services designed to help the youth attain competitive integrated employment."<sup>78</sup>

This recent policy change should help improve the exchange of information since DETR-BVR must determine the eligibility of the student and refer transition-age students to the Regional Centers. Additionally, these new requirements may reduce the overreliance by state agencies on sheltered workshops, about which many parents and advocates expressed concerns.

## **2. Quality of services**

Stakeholders around the Silver State expressed concern with the quality of services and programs offered by the State's Regional Centers and DETR-BVR. Among the concerns expressed by focus group participants are:

- Offices are thinly staffed and the geographic area of service is large. DETR-BVR in southern Nevada only has five vocational rehabilitation counselors assigned to work with Clark County School District transition specialists; it also services the urban core as well as Laughlin and Pahrump.
- Caseloads are large; consequently, case managers and vocational rehabilitation counselors do not have sufficient time and resources to provide individualized attention and identify programs and opportunities that align with students' interests.
- Case managers appear to be more interested in closing cases promptly at the expense of taking the time to find programs and opportunities that meet the students' interests, preferences, and skills.
- There are long waiting times to receive services after initial contact has been made and between appointments (especially at the Regional Centers).
- There is no coordination of services among different offices within Regional Centers.
- DETR-BVR and job coaches are not providing appropriate and high quality training that help transition-age students retain their jobs.
- Rural families expressed frustration that supported employment services were limited (and their youth were often placed in sheltered workshops).
- Agency staff, case managers, and job developers have low expectations of transition-age students.

- Assessments (including community-based assessments) are inadequate and do not appropriately measure skill or interest. One parent advocate remarked, “Is sorting hangers or folding clothes really an accurate way of assessing someone’s ability and interests?”
- Frustration that job coaching and evaluation “are not comprehensive enough to meet the needs of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.
- DETR-BVR contracts job placement services to authorized service providers, but there is little training and no formal criteria for becoming a job developer. Turnover is high and there is no quality control.
- DETR-BVR and Regional Centers do not appear to have established criteria to assess providers and process for awarding contracts lacks transparency and accountability.

### **3. Lack of integrated service delivery**

Stakeholders expressed concern that there is minimal coordination among agencies and that there is little integrated service delivery. As one advocate shared, a transition-age student who is currently receiving services from Rural Regional Center wanted to attend a university’s group-home based program for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. The university, however, falls within the geographic service area of one of the State’s urban Regional Centers. Disagreement arose between the Regional Centers about which agency had the responsibility for paying the service provider. “No one wanted to pay,” said the advocate. The lack of integrated service delivery can pose a barrier to a student with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities who is seeking post-secondary opportunities.

## **Community Barriers**

### **1. Limited employer engagement**

The single biggest barrier identified by the broad cross-section of stakeholders is limited employer engagement. Employers remain hesitant to serve as a host location for community based assessments, to provide internships and work-based experiences, and to provide integrated employment opportunities. This lack of employer engagement is even more acute in rural areas where there are fewer numbers of employers to engage and the range of possible work-based employment opportunities is limited.

### **2. Limited number of service providers**

Nevada has a limited number of service providers to support the needs of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. The shortage is even more acute in rural counties. Many existing service providers are at capacity currently. The lack of service providers across the State poses a challenge to state agencies, like DETR-BVR, who seek to partner with high quality, high-performing service providers to expand service delivery and leverage federal funds.

## **Recommendations**

### **Opportunities**

There is a confluence of policy developments around the State that provide an opportunity to address many of the barriers that prevent high school students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities from accessing and moving along high quality pathways that prepare them for life after graduation.

First, for the past year, decision makers and policy leaders in education and workforce development have convened a series of meetings to discuss ways to strengthen high quality college and career pathways for students in Nevada, including those with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. These meetings have produced a set of recommendations and action items that the State will begin to implement.

The reauthorization of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), (formerly known as Elementary and Secondary Education Act, replacing the *No Child Left Behind Act*), which devolves greater accountability to states, has provided an opportunity to discuss Nevada's assessment and accountability systems. Against this policy backdrop, NDE's High School Graduation Committee is exploring possible revisions to secondary school pathways and graduation requirements to ensure that the career and college pathways offered to students have value when they pursue post-secondary opportunities. Simultaneously, NDE is proposing comprehensive special education graduation reform that provides alternate pathways or avenues for students with disabilities to receive a standard diploma.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the new WIOA regulations expand the role of DETR-BVR in post-secondary transitions. Specifically, WIOA requires early involvement with students transitioning from school to employment and post-secondary education, increased coordination between vocational rehabilitation agencies and state and local education agencies, and supports increased work-based learning opportunities. Collectively, these policy developments provide a backdrop against which stakeholders can consider the recommendations outlined below, which may be taken under advisement by Nevada's leaders.

### **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 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 of 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.<sup>8</sup>

#### **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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Clark County School District reorganization (AB 394) raises a possible need for specialized training for principals, who are the official local education agency (LEA) representatives. As such, principals are deemed qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, special education; are knowledgeable about the curriculum, and are knowledgeable about and authorized by the LEA to commit available resources of the LEA. Under the reorganization of CCSD, principals may need additional training on their responsibilities, the IEP, and transition planning.



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.<sup>84</sup> And, currently, slightly more than 10 percent of current JAG Nevada participants have a documented disability.

In large part, the secret to JAG Nevada's success is rooted in its JAG specialist (like a counselor or job coach) that works closely with students to help them succeed academically and chart a post-secondary pathway (e.g., higher education, military, employment). 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.<sup>85</sup>

## **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.<sup>86</sup> 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."<sup>87</sup> 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, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students take the same core academic classes to work towards a diploma. In 11<sup>th</sup> 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 alternative 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.<sup>88</sup>

## **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.

### **5. Improve transparency among State agencies and criteria for awarding contracts**

Across Nevada, stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of transparency associated with state agencies and their operations, particularly the way they contract out services. (State agencies often award no-bid contracts).<sup>89</sup> Organizational representatives commented that agencies often appear to approve vendors and award contracts without any clear criteria for selection or rigorous performance evaluation.

## **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 supported employment services and transition-related programming to Nevada's rural counties.

Additionally, 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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**About the Kenny C. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities**

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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